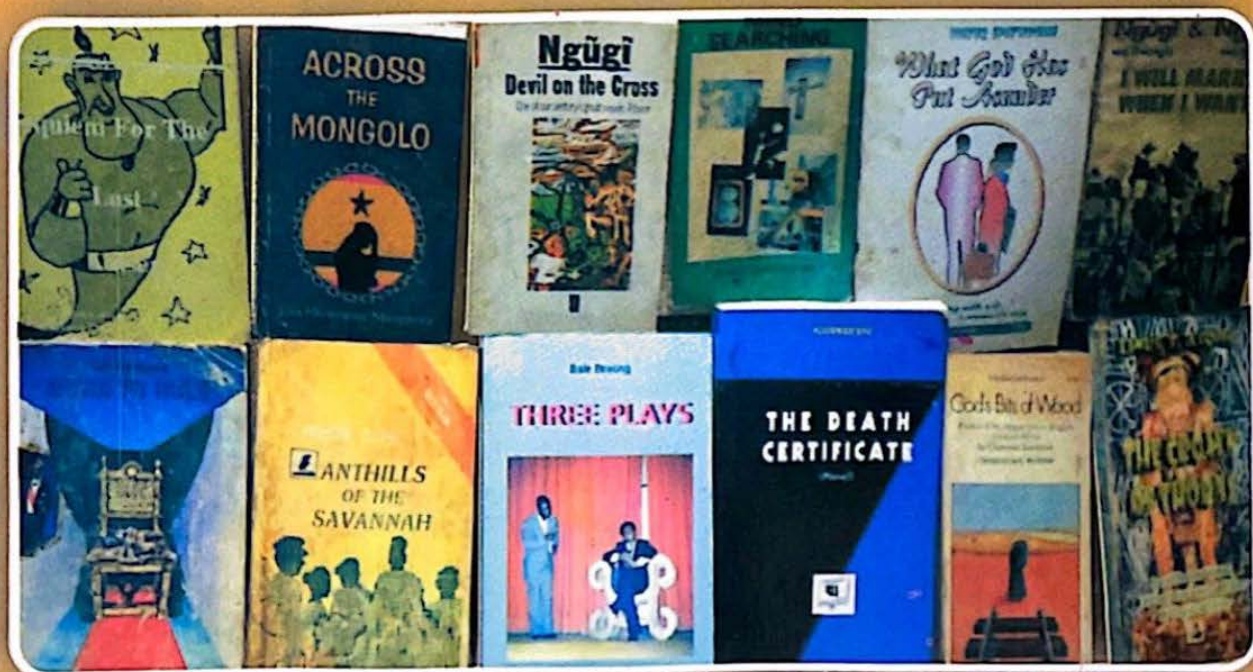


Shadrach A. Ambanasom

A Marxist Critical Approach to African Literature

An Introduction



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The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression
An Introduction (2007) Criticism

Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English
(2012) Criticism

A Marxist Critical Approach to African Literature
An Introduction (2013) Criticism

SHADRACH A. AMBANASOM



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TO AFRICAN LITERATURE**



AN INTRODUCTION

Published in Cameroon
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Dedication

*To those Committed to the Improvement of the
Human Condition.*

PREFACE

The title of this work needs a little clarification and delimitation to obviate the need to look for a comprehensiveness of treatment of the subject which it does not pretend to. This has to do with the epithet "African literature", for African literature is both written and oral - a massive collection of literary productions in national and imperial languages. But this project is concerned only with a limited aspect of written African literature, therefore leaving out, completely, the vast area of orature.

With regard to geographical coverage, the work has touched neither the northern nor the southern parts of the African continent. It limits itself to a horizontal spread of selected written literary texts from West to East Africa, beginning from Senegal, passing through Nigeria and Cameroon, and ending in Kenya. And even in the selected literary works the project is concerned only with the novel and drama, putting aside poetry, the essay and short stories.

The selected novels include Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* from Senegal; Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* from Nigeria; Linus T. Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*, Tah Asongwed's *Born to Rule*, Francis Nyamnjoh's *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African*, John N. Nkengasong's *Across the Mongolo*, and Alobwed'Epie's *The Death Certificate*, all of these six novels from Cameroon; and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* from Kenya. As for the dramatic texts three come from Cameroon and one from Kenya. All of these make a total of thirteen selected literary texts to which the Marxist critical approach has been applied.

It is obvious from the above that the selection of texts is skewed in favour of Cameroon. The reason for this is simple: Anglophone Cameroon literature has long existed

in the shadow of Francophone Cameroon literature. The former has now come of age and needs to be given the critical attention and exposure it deserves*.

The purpose of this work is to piece together essential ideas culled from Marxist critical literature as well as some scattered views of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on art and literature. Then the researcher applies these Marxist critical concepts to the criticism of the thirteen selected African literary texts, whether they are written from a Marxist perspective or not.

Of the eight chapters in this book, the fifth and sixth are the most recent addition to the original monograph substantially written in the early 1990s. Of course, I have since made updates and changes here and there in the interest of critical research. But the bulk of the work still transmits my general critical spirit of more than two decades ago as well as its weakness too. Intellectual honesty demands that I make this solemn declaration: I have a soft spot for Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (see Chapter 8 of the present work), especially for the sections dealing with the sensational and provocative testimonies of the local capitalist thieves with those sonorous, rhythmic names like Gitutu wa Gataanguru, Kihaahu wa Gatheeca, Nditika wa Nguunji, and Mwireri wa Mukiraai, all of which bring me good memories of my literature class of 1990 – 1992 in the defunct ENS Annexe Bambili, now swallowed up in the sprawling University of Bamenda. It is for this reason that I ask readers, especially scholars, to forgive my indulgent citing of certain passages from that text.

When I was rounding off work on this project twenty one years ago, in 1992, socialism was beleaguered in Eastern Europe. Though seriously buffeted and rocked to its very foundation, it was, as an official policy, still tolerated in many quarters in that part of the world. But by the time

I got to the last chapter of the monograph that same year, the Soviet Union, the central pillar of socialism, was disintegrating, with its various socialist republics going their different ways in favour of market economy.

I asked myself why I should be working on a critical approach based on a philosophy of life that was now being seriously undermined. Who would care for an aesthetic theory founded on a defunct philosophy? But then I soon reasoned that this was not a simple question of a facile rejection of Marxist aesthetics on the basis of dying socialism. There were grounds on which Marxist aesthetics could be justified despite the realities from former socialist countries.

True, the central pillar of Marxism, the Soviet Union, has collapsed; true, the other important pillar, the People's Republic of China, has seriously modified its socialist economy in favour of a mixed economy too. But there are countries around the world, especially in Latin America, that still cling on to socialism, even if some of them are accused of attempting to cry louder than the bereaved. Besides, some Marxists would say that Marxism has only made a tactical withdrawal. They would add that capitalism still contains within itself its own undoing: its basic paradox. The paradox is that capitalism thrives best at the great expense of those who make it work – the exploited workers. At its best capitalism can only effect token, cosmetic changes to contain the restiveness of its dissatisfied workers; at its worst it will eventually cause the exploited masses to rise once more to overthrow it and usher in socialism again.

Committed Marxists or not, we would not be fair to ourselves if we did not admit that Marxism contains great humanistic ideas. It is, however, a different thing when an imperfect humanity is called forth to implement perfect ideas. For those who think that humanity can still accomplish

the angelic feat of producing communism, the ultimate goal of Marxism, Marxism will still inspire a following. To these adherents, Marxist aesthetics will still be very relevant. Godfrey B. Tangwa (alias Gobata) (2011) expresses the idea succinctly thus:

The failure of "scientific socialism" does not mean the failure of socialism. Marxism and socialism are having a bad day because of the accidental historical linkage with intolerant monolithism, dictatorship and repression. But, as people all over the world continue their struggle against the evils of the so-called liberal economies, which depends^(sic) purely on "market forces" resulting in private ownership of vast wealth by a small minority, and the consequent impoverishment of the majority, the advantages of planned economies with democratic set up, the advantages of socialism ... would soon be rediscovered. (71-72)

Above all, perhaps, the most important reason for believing Marxist aesthetics will always remain viable is that, as a scientific theory of human societies, Marxism, from which Marxist aesthetics is derived, has had a great deal of political, economic and cultural impact on many countries in the world. Even if its politics and economics are now being questioned, culturally, Marxism has left a long-lasting influence in art. Many literary works, for example, were produced during the period when socialism waxed very strongly. Some of these works leaned on certain socialist assumptions. In other words, works have been produced with Marxist influence, from a socialist perspective. Some of them are great works of art and extant

and we cannot ignore them. Such being the case, the tool to better appreciate these works is the Marxist critical approach.

While socialist-oriented works are most amenable to Marxist aesthetics, however, they are not the only types of works analysable with its aid. Other works, even without conscious Marxist coloration, can still be examined with the help of Marxist critical approach. Marxist theory helps to enrich our interpretation of literary texts. It enables us to discover some important ideas embodied in these texts which we might not have seen better without Marxist aesthetics. Above all, if we duly exploit its humanitarian dimension, Marxist theory will "help us to see the ways in which ideology blinds us to our own" involvement in oppressive socioeconomic agendas (Tyson 66).

Marxist critics have convincingly established the fact that no serious work of art is conceived in an ideological vacuum. By that premise, if every major literary work emanates from an ideological conception of the world, it becomes necessary for us, as part of our overall effort to apprehend a work of art, to understand the ideology or ideologies of the world of the work. This is exactly what Marxist aesthetics provides - the tool for the examination of the relationship between art and ideology.

And in the analysis of this relationship, as carried out in the present work with reference to the specific literary texts under discussion, I have attempted to strike a balance between the texts' overall social and ideological contexts, on the one hand, and their artistic dimensions, on the other. In uniting Marxist theory and aspects of New Criticism, therefore, I have endeavoured, I hope, to come close to what Henri Arvon (1973) calls authentic Marxist aesthetics, rather than harping only on "a repressive sociologism" (114). Far from indulging in textual analysis as an essentialism in

itself, I have tried to show in my analyses, the social relevance of the texts for their immediate community, in particular, and the African continent, in general.

Perhaps this particular critical approach may not have responded completely to the militant demands of the "African Marxist intellectual tradition which exploits textual analysis as a means to a greater goal of liberation from colonialism and its new imperial forms" (Alfred Ndi: criticism). Nevertheless, I believe that while my critical approach, with regard to the socio-political and economic liberation of the African continent, may not have been stridently bellicose in its tone against undesirable, repressive ideologies like capitalism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, tribalism, despotism, authoritarianism, conservatism or even organised religion, it has its critical legitimacy within the context of Marxist criticism.

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End Note

* See my other works on the subject: *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression* (2007/2009); *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* (2012) and *Education of the Deprived* revised edition (2013).

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PART ONE

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

MARXIST CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

Since Marxist criticism is an aesthetic approach derived from Marxism, it is appropriate for us, prior to any discussion of the subject, to attempt to state, however briefly, what Marxism is about. Yet we cannot pretend to examine Marxism in any substantial sense. In the first place, it is too complex and complicated a philosophy of social and economic reality for the layman to fully understand; in the second place, we are more interested in its derivational aspect; that is, with its applicability to, or implication for, literary criticism. Basically, therefore, whatever view we express here relating to Marxism will be no more than a layman's view, for, anything other than a common man's notion of it is beyond the scope of this work.

An economic and political philosophy formulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marxism holds that history is primarily determined by economics. It regards the history of any society, with the exception of that of primitive communalism, as the history of class struggle. With particular reference to the mid-19th century European society, Marxism views the history of society as one in which

the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class had previously overthrown the feudal nobility. But that the bourgeoisie in turn would be inevitably supplanted by the proletariat or the working class.

According to Marxism, there are certain contradictions and weaknesses within capitalism. These will cause great economic crisis and impoverishment, leading to depressing and worsening conditions for the working classes, and the condition will end up forcing working classes to rise, overthrow the capitalists, and then assume control over the means of production. There will then follow a classless society in which the exploitative state will be replaced by one with a rational economic cooperation, one with a fair and more equitable distribution of the national resources and the means of livelihood. (Levy *et al* 521) The ultimate goal of Marxism is communism, the stage following after socialism when classes completely cease to exist and men become very happy. However, communism does not yet exist, and so the socialist countries are in the phase of socialism where class struggle has not yet ended.

At this point the role of Lenin ought to be mentioned. Lenin (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov), the Russian intellectual, devoted a great deal of his time to the study of Marxism. He is solely responsible for translating Marxist theory into practice in the twentieth century. (Appignanes 9) The main brain behind the victory of the proletarian Revolution in Russia in October 1917, Lenin formulated the philosophy now known as Marxism-Leninism, which is the theory of the proletarian liberation movement, or the theory and practice of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Marxist-Leninist works have impacted on the psychology of modern man. They have made it clear that history is not made by great men alone; that the working

class constitutes a force to be reckoned with, a powerful group with the potential to create events, to make history. This revelation imbues the proletariat with a sense of historical optimism. (Parkhomenko *et al* 12) As Maynard Solomon states, "Marxism's goal is the liberation of consciousness, the freeing of praxis from bondage via revolutionary theory." (Solomon 14) Besides, "No revolution can take place without the work of ideological preparation, without the transformation of consciousness." (Solomon 16)

Other philosophers have attempted to interpret the world, but Marxists have gone a step further. They have not stopped at an interpretation of the world; they have attempted to change it. Nay, they have not only attempted to change it; they intend to improve it immensely. (Solomon 21) Therein lies the essentially humanist mission of Marxism that constitutes its goal.

The Marxist philosophical method is Dialectical Materialism, which considers all phenomena as being in a flux, in a state of constant movement, in a process of change. The development of nature itself is in this process considered a result of the struggle between contradictions within nature. Rius explains that it is the doctrine of development, a science of the universal laws governing the development of society and thought. (Rius 1976) This view was first put forward by Hegel (1770-1831).

Karl Marx derived his concept of dialectics from Hegel but rejected Hegel's notion that it is thought that governs history. According to Marx the existing mode of production in any stage of history is the thesis. From within this mode of production there emerge opposing productive forces that constitute the antithesis. From the union of these two forces

there emerges a more productive economy known as the synthesis. (Beer xii-xiii)

Our main concern being Marxist criticism, we had better state, as Maynard Solomon has done in his work, that there is nothing like an original Marxist aesthetics. (Solomon 21) The founders of Marxism, Marx and Engels, never evolved any sustained theory of art and literature, never left behind any fully developed aesthetic. Needless to say that if they had done so, they would have made things easier for us attempting to grapple with Marxist criticism today; we would simply have been dealing with a clear-cut theory, with a fixed, even if hackneyed and over-flogged approach.

However, though they did not leave behind an elaborated theory of art, Marx and Engels did make comments and observations on art and literature in their writings. Some of them will be examined below. The history of Marxist aesthetic narrative is an attempt by later scholars to apply Marxist ideas to art and literature. And this makes the subject more complex because the various applications do not compel universal consensus.

Our aim in this work is to attempt to glean some of the ideas of a few scholars or Marxist critics relating to art such as history and literature, literature and ideology, form and content, realism, and commitment etc. Our ultimate goal is that, having grasped what Marxist aesthetics is, we can then apply it to the appreciation of some African literary works written from a socialist, or even a non-socialist, perspective.

As already indicated, the central doctrine in Marxism is what is known as Historical Materialism, or the materialist conception of history. This formulation, contained in the preface to Marx's critique of political Economy (1859), runs thus:

In the social production of their material life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their wills; these relations of production correspond to a definite state of the development of their material forces of production.

The sum total of these relations of production makes up the economic structure of society - the real foundations on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. (qtd in Beer ix)

Thus from the economic base in any society rises a superstructure, a type of political and legal organization that gives legitimacy to the social class that controls power. This superstructure contains other forms of social consciousness that could be religious, ethical, aesthetic, etc, which is what Marxism refers to as ideology. Ideology's function is also to lend legitimacy to the ruling class in the society. This means in essence that the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class.

Marxism then views art, views literature, as part of the superstructure of society. By implication, for one to understand literature, one ought to apprehend the whole social process of which literature is part. As Terry Eagleton puts it:

Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms

of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the social mentality or ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place. (Eagleton 6)

Therefore, to understand *King Lear*, *Hamlet* or any other great work of literature from a Marxist perspective, for example, Eagleton feels that one has to go beyond interpreting symbolism; one has to do more than examining their literary history and sociological facts. This entails apprehending the "complex, indirect relations between those works and the ideological worlds they inhabit." (*Ibid*) Eagleton is not simply talking here of themes and pre-occupations, but he is equally talking of style, rhythm, image, quality and form.

Since the concepts evolve in a rather convoluted manner, it is perhaps best for us to isolate such key concepts in Marxism as commitment, reflectionism, ideology and commodification before extracting what tidily stands out as essential in Marxist aesthetics and criticism.

Commitment

The idea that a writer should commit his art to the cause of the proletariat is a central concern in socialist literature and Marxist criticism. But the question of partisanship in literature does not mean a simple, overt propagandistic commitment universally accepted by

Marxists. To be sure, most Marxists agree that there is nothing like art for art's sake. However, while some call for overt commitment of literature to the cause of the masses, others call for a more subtle commitment. The question of partisanship in literature became prevalent after the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 from which three literary tendencies arose in Russia thereafter, namely, formalism, futurism and proletkult.

The formalists were concerned with the formal aspects, the technical devices of a work of art. The Futurists and the Proletkult thought of a socialist art distinct from bourgeois art and one that would promote the aims of the working class. This tendency eventually gave birth to the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, RAPP. Its main goal was to create a new proletarian culture as distinct from the bourgeois type and one linked to the objective and ideology of the new socialist state, scornful of bourgeois past.

When he became the President of the Soviet Union, Stalin decided to bring writers under the control of the Communist Party. So RAPP and other independent literary associations were dissolved and in their place was created the Union of Soviet writers in 1932. In 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Socialist Realism was officially proclaimed to be the guiding principle in Soviet literary production. It called on all writers to be "engineers of human soul" and to ensure that "literary creativity was part and parcel of man's struggle against nature". (Ngara 12) Here one notices that the question of commitment in literature becomes part and parcel of official policy, one devoted to the propaganda of the ideas of the ruling party.

Now, this approach, essentially disdainful of past culture, is not one that can be supported by genuine

Marxists. Marx, Engels and Lukács would not have approved of it; nor would Leon Trotsky, the brilliant Russian intellectual. Trotsky stood for a more flexible Marxist policy in matters of art. His stance is clear in his book *Literature and Revolution*. Like Lenin, he believed that socialist art should draw from the best that bourgeois art could provide. "We Marxists have always lived with tradition." He would, however, not tolerate any eclectic counter-revolutionary censorship tempered with a flexible policy on art. He grants that socialist art should be realist but not in any narrow generic sense; for realism is neither revolutionary nor reactionary but a philosophy of life that should not be limited to the techniques of a particular school. Trotsky would not support the subjective partisan approach in which poets were forced to write on specific areas of life to advance certain political attitudes. "The belief that we force poets, willy-nilly, to write about nothing but factory chimneys or a revolt against capitalism is absurd." (qtd in Eagleton 43)

By acknowledging that a "work of art should be judged in the first place by its own law," Trotsky approves of what the formalists consider central in a work of art: its formal aspects, its technical devices. At the same time, however, Leon Trotsky attacks the formalists for insisting only on these formal aspects (rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, imagery, symbolism, diction, irony, etc.), paying scant attention to the work's social content.

This approach derived largely from the opinion of Lenin who subordinated literature to politics, enunciating:

Down with non-partisan writers; Down with literary supermen; Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and screw" of

one single great social democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically conscious vanguard of the entire working class. (Solomon 180)

Though Lenin's comment is more concerned with political literature, it is often taken to include all literature. Besides, despite the fact that he subordinated literature to politics, he believed that socialist art should absorb the best from bourgeois art.

Mao Tse-Tung

Mao Tse-Tung believed strongly in committed literature and waved aside all talk about art for art's sake, echoing Lenin who, by the way, had great influence on him. According to Mao, art and literature belong to definite classes in society and serve the political interests of these classes. Revolutionary art and literature must serve the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary art and literature are essential cogs and wheels in the machines of the revolutionary cause. And the task of the revolutionary writer is to produce revolutionary literature which will inspire the masses with great enthusiasm to rise, to unite and to transform their society, propelling history forward.

Mao believes that to effectively do this a revolutionary writer should draw from real human characters in concrete situations. He should study the behaviour of people closely. (Ngara 13) As noted by Emmanuel Ngara, by stressing the importance of realistic characters in concrete situations, Mao Tse-Tung touches on a central principle in Marxist conception of realism.

Marx and Engels on Commitment

Though political concerns coloured Marx's literary judgment, it would be erroneous to suppose that he "equated the aesthetically fine with the politically correct" "He was more predisposed towards the realist, satirical and radical writers, remaining hostile to Romanticism that he considered as a poetical mystification of political reality." (Eagleton 45) On the issue of commitment, the attitude of Marx and Engels is evident in two important letters written by Engels to novelists who had submitted their work to him.

To one of the novelists, Minna Kautsky, Engels wrote a letter in 1885 indicating that he was not opposed to political commitment in literature but that it was wrong for a writer to assume an overt political stand in his work, to be openly partisan. If a political message or tendency there is in a fictional work it should emerge unobtrusively from the dramatized situations. And it is only through this indirect method that revolutionary fiction could work successfully on the bourgeois sensibilities of its readers:

A socialist-based novel fully achieves its purpose ... if by conscientiously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusion about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the bourgeois world, although the author does not offer any definite solutions or does not even line up openly on any particular side. (Solomon 180)

The other novelist to whom Engels wrote (in 1888) was Margaret Harkness, whose *A City Girl* Engels criticized for weakness in character portrayal. Commenting on the novel's subtitle "A Realistic Story" Engels said "Realism to my mind implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances". He went on to say that Harkness depicts a working class devoid of a sense of their historical role and potential development. Because of the absence of the sense of history, Harkness has only, contended Engels, succeeded in producing a "naturalist" rather than a "realist" work.

Engels's two letters suggest that it is not necessary to openly engage in political commitment since genuinely realist writing itself, in the words of Eagleton, "dramatizes the significant forces of social life, breaking beyond both the photographically observable and the imposed rhetoric of a political solution." (Eagleton 46-7)

Marxist criticism was later on to develop this concept into what is known as "objective partisanship." According to this concept, an author does not need to tag his political intention on to the work because if he dramatizes the real and potential forces objectively he is in that sense already partisan since the political tendency will emerge unobtrusively from situations. This objective partisanship, characteristic of Marx and Engels's literary criticism, was denounced under Stalinism as nothing but pure "objectivism" and was supplanted by purely subjective partisanship.

Working alone and apart from each other, Marx and Engels criticized Lasselle's verse-drama *Franz von Sickingen* on the grounds that it lacked the type of rich realism found in Shakespeare, and this deficiency resulted in reducing characters to mere mouthpieces of history. They equally

criticized Lasselle's main character as being atypical for his purpose. In 1845 Marx in *The Holy Family* equally criticized Eugene Sue's best-selling novel, *Les Mysteres de Paris* on the basis of characterization. He found the characterization two-dimensional and not representative enough. Marx discovered a kind of self-contradiction in Sue's novel: the hero who is supposed to be morally admirable turns out to be unintentionally immoral and self-righteous. And the work, though written from the perspective of French bourgeois ideology, at times transcends its ideological limits and "delivers a slap in the face of bourgeois prejudice."

These contradictory aspects of Sue's work reveal a distinction between an explicit social "message" of the work and what, in spite of it, the book actually reveals. Not necessarily a weakness, this quality is also evident in Balzac's work and helps to endear Balzac to Marx and Engels. It lies in the fact that while Balzac is a Catholic and a legitimist in orientation, while he is a supporter of the status quo on the surface, the power of his artistic perceptions leads him to place in difficulty, to subtly expose to criticism, the very people he sympathizes with most - the nobles. To put it differently, because Balzac is a great realist artist, he reveals, despite himself, clear admiration for his bitterest political enemies, the Republicans whose political views are naturally at odds with his. (Solomon 68-9)

As Engels comments in his letter to Margaret Harkness, Balzac's "satire is never keener, his irony never more bitter, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply - the nobles." (*Ibid*) This distinction between a work's subjective intention and its objective meaning is what is known as the principle of contradiction: a writer's political views may run counter to what the work actually reveals.

Reflectionism

Another issue in Marxist criticism is the concept of reflection. One view holds that literature is simply a reflection of reality. The crudity and inadequacy of this view lies in the mirror metaphor it embodies. For it asserts rather simplistically that literature or art inertly, passively or mechanically reflects society in the way that a mirror inertly, passively and mechanically reproduces an object. It does not take much reflection on the part of a serious literary critic or artist to refute this view that nevertheless carries some limited truth in it. The view can be modified by Leon Trotsky's which is that a work of art is "a deflection, a changing and a transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art". (Eagleton 50) In line with this perspective, Eagleton holds that literature does not stand in a reflective, one-to-one, symmetrical relation to its object. The object is deformed, refracted, dissolved and reproduced, to use an image from gastronomy, as a blender reproduces blended ingredients which, even in their broken down state, remain chemically part of their crude originals.

The issue of reflectionism in literature is important in Marxist criticism, if only because it is a foil to formalist theories that uphold the independence of a work of art, claiming that a literary work can be discussed without reference to history. Of course, one does not need to be a committed Marxist to accept the basic belief in Marxist criticism that any work of art is a product of the society in which it is produced, that it emerges from the social and historical and therefore ideological conditions of the society producing it. The concomitant idea is that such a work cannot be fully appreciated without reference to such conditions, without reference to human society and history.

It should be noted here that though they do not use the mirror imagery of reflection in relation to literary works, Marx and Engels do relate works of art to their societies. In *The Holy Family* Marx criticizes Sue's novel on the ground that, in some respects, it is not true to the life of its times. Engels on his part "could find in Homer direct illustrations of kinship systems in early Greece." (*Ibid*)

Ideology

Marxists believe that literature is not written in an ideological vacuum; that a work of literature – novel, play, poem, short story, essay, etc. - like all cultural productions, is a product of the socioeconomic, and therefore ideological conditions of the period and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it to be so. Marxists hold that because human beings themselves are products of their material historical and ideological environment, authors cannot help but write works that carry some form of ideology (Tyson 63).

With this ideological constant, many Marxists assume that a work of literature should manifest ideologies that the author either intends to reinforce in the reader or invites the reader to criticize. Literary works often do both: counter ideologies are represented to deconstruct the dominant, repressive ideologies the work embodies. In literary works ideologies are inscribed in content (action, objects and theme); but, above all, they are carried by form (the totality of the expressive techniques and devices).

For many Marxists realism is the best aesthetic form for Marxist purposes. This is because if the authors using the realist fiction present the real world clearly and accurately, if they paint this world faithfully, presenting its true socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions,

they will, willy-nilly, be seen to encourage the reader to see the ugly side of their material/historical reality.

In contrast, non-realistic, experimental fiction does not inspire much Marxist following because it presents fragmented experience and estranges the readers with its inaccessible language. Nevertheless, some Marxists still value surrealist and postmodern fiction because the fragmentation of human experience it represents and the alienation it creates in the reader "constitutes a critique of the fragmented world and the alienated human beings produced by capitalism in the twentieth" [and twenty-first centuries] (Tyson 64).

So central to Marxism is the concept of ideology that we should attempt here a brief definition and further discussion of it. According to Webster's Third International Dictionary, ideology is "a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture" (1123). As for Lois Tyson, "an ideology is a belief system, that is, a product of cultural conditioning" (52).

Many terminologies ending with "ism" are ideologies including religion, ethical systems and astrology. The critical theories in literature are ideologies too. However, not all ideologies are necessarily desirable. According to Tyson (53), "undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas." But to make sure that they are accepted by the citizens of a society, these repressive ideologies disguise themselves as natural ways of viewing reality, instead of regarding themselves as set-ups instigated by human interests.

From a Marxist perspective, ideology plays an important role in maintaining in place those in power. Hence those who subscribe to repressive political, capitalist, imperialist or colonialist agendas exploit ideology:

patriotism, nationalism, religion etc. For example, in the heyday of colonialism and imperialism, when colonial flags fluttered over many European colonies in Africa, African freedom fighters under the banners of ideologies like anti-colonial nationalism and patriotism, whipped up national sentiments to galvanize the colonized subjects to unite and oust the colonialists so as to assume political independence under the emerging African leaders.

But after the attainment of political independence, the new African leaders still went ahead to invoke the power of some of these repressive ideologies to remain in power. Religion, for example, was tolerated for what it had to offer to those in leadership position: it brought education, it built schools, hospitals and orphanages. In addition to all these obvious good works of Christianity, the Christian religion came with the Bible that preached the good news, especially the Bible of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the Bible of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God..." (Mat 5:3-11).

Those who benefit most from repressive political agendas, those who control the natural, financial and human resources; those enriched by predatory imperialist, capitalist agendas, have an interest in promoting or tolerating the Bible that preaches the virtues of submission, patience, docility and non-resistance since the exploited masses will be richly rewarded in heaven.

The goal of Marxist critics is to identify the ideology at work in cultural productions – literature, film, painting, music, television programmes, education, commercial advertisements, religion and forms of entertainment, etc.

and to analyse how that ideology supports or undermines the socioeconomic system (the power structure) in which that cultural production plays a crucial role. If we take a popular form of entertainment in Cameroon like protest songs/music of the kind played by popular musicians like Longué Longué and others, we will see that while Cameroonians are being entertained by the melody, they are more or less taken off guard in what seems an innocent medium, namely, transmitting a radical message inscribed in an ideology that undermines the power structure in Cameroon. Essentially this ideology is radicalism which subverts the repressive capitalist ideology in place. We must remember that radicalism calls for fundamental, far-reaching change rather than gradual, incremental reforms.

Commodification

At this point we should look at the concept of commodification as used in Marxist criticism. To do so let us first examine the word "commodity". If you buy an object, say, the novel, *Son of the Native Soil*, to read for pleasure or information, then the book has "use value". But if you sell this text for a higher price for financial gain, then the book has "exchange value". However, if, on the other hand, you display that novel on your table or bookshelf to impress your friends with your refined literary taste and sophistication, then the novel has a "sign-exchange value".

For Marxist critics an object becomes a "commodity" only in terms of the money or other commodities for which it can be exchanged, or the social status it confers on its owner (Tyson 59). Commodification is therefore the practice of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value, or sign-exchange value. You commodify an object

or a person if you relate to them in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value.

You commodify a person if you structure your relationship with that person in the interest of your financial or social advancement. Will being seen in the company of this or that person afford me more money or more social prestige? What do I gain by being seen in his or her company? At the bottom of all this human behaviour or posturing is pure exploitation, period! And this is what Marxist criticism is interested in: a commodified view of life.

Essentials in Authentic Marxist Critical Aesthetics

According to Henri Arvon (1973) true Marxist critical approach is like true Marxism, which is not just a simple socioeconomic view of life but rather a global vision of human reality. An authentic Marxist theory is far from a simple sociology of art. A genuine Marxist aesthetics too aims at a total view of art, taking into account the various elements that comprise the realm of art and thus "the exact opposite of a repressive sociologism." (Arvon 114)

The authentic Marxist aesthetics, to some extent, issues from Leon Trotsky's critical thinking in *Literature and Revolution* (Eagleton 43). In the text, as discussed earlier (see "Commitment" above), Trotsky endorses both the Russian Formalist approach and the social context of the literary work. In general, however, Marxist critical aesthetics is entwined in Marxist philosophy that essentially is deconstructive of exploitative political ideologies. It can briefly be held up as an economic and political philosophy

with the humanist mission of interpreting, changing and improving the world. Marxism holds that the prime determinant of history in every society is the history of class struggle. Although there is nothing like an original Marxist aesthetics, critics and scholars have applied Marxism and the scattered comments of Marx and Engels on art and literature to literary criticism.

In this regard, there are two orientations of Marxist criticism. On the one hand, we have the "vulgar" Marxist critics, who explore works of art solely for their ideological content and relate it directly to class struggle in society. On the other hand we have the genuine Marxist critics, who consider the dialectical relationship between content and form when examining a work of art even if they place a little more emphasis on content.

Realism, the genuine dialectical art form, is highly regarded in Marxist criticism. That is why naturalism and formalism are strongly attacked and scorned by Marxist critics. It is a basic tenet in Marxist criticism that literature or art is the social and historical product of the society producing it; that works of art are socially and historically conditioned, not just mysteriously inspired or solely based on the psychology of their creators. In this connection, literature is, to some extent, a reflection of the society producing it. No major literary work is conceived within an ideological vacuum. All art emanates from an ideological conception of the world. There is a view that literature is nothing but ideology in artistic form, that literature simply reflects the dominant ideology(ies) of its epoch. The other view holds that literature challenges the dominant ideology of its societies. But both views need not be mutually exclusive. As Eagleton says, authentic art always transcends the ideological limits of its time, yielding insight into the

realities which ideology hides. To fully understand a work of art, it is thus important to examine both its artistic dimensions and the total social process of which it is a part.

Commitment of art is another core principle in Marxist criticism. Art for art's sake is nonsense to Marxist critics. They prefer art for life's sake. However, there are, on the one hand, supporters of subjective partisanship and, on the other, proponents of objective partisanship. A kind of balancing or synthesis is that true characterization should combine typicality and individuality.

Marxist Critical Practice

Given the ideological imperative, then, all literary works carry one form of ideology or the other. However, not all creative writers are of the same level of ideological enlightenment. Some writers are more ideologically conscious than others. But whether or not they are aware of it, when creative writers employ the realist mode of fiction genuinely, neither understating nor overstating, but exploring situations and characters sensitively and completely, they are bound to produce literary works from which ideologies would emerge.

In their unique composition of verbal expressions, literary works are far from uniform, neither in content nor in their manner of execution. Each literary text is therefore a unique artistic communicative experience. Reading a literary work between the lines, the Marxist critic may notice that the work is out to reinforce capitalist, imperialist, or colonialist values. If so, such a text has a capitalist agenda. In a different work, however, the critic may discern, from the totality of the text's expressive devices, that it is out to

criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces in society; he may discover that the text's intention is to invite the readers to criticize or condemn the oppressive socioeconomic forces as well as the repressive ideologies that the work embodies. If such is the case, the work may be said to have a Marxist agenda.

However, the Marxist critic may notice that in this text, or, for that matter, in a different work, the author goes beyond a Marxist agenda to propose the way forward in which the exploited proletariat are imbued with a sense of historical optimism and poised to overthrow the existing capitalist structure with the intention of replacing it with a socialist mode of production and equitable redistribution of economic resources. If this is the case, then the work may be said to harbor a socialist agenda.

Marxist critics are often out to see what role organized religion plays in a literary work, especially in preventing the characters from being aware of or from resisting oppressive socioeconomic forces. Should organized religion help in blinding the characters to the resistance of repressive ideologies, then it is the critic's place to condemn this aspect of the work.

Faced with a literary work, Marxist critics may like to ask questions like the following: Does this text support a capitalist, imperialist or colonialist agenda? Or does it have a Marxist agenda? Is the text a critique of capitalism? In what ways might this text be said to have a socialist agenda? Is there a sense in which the text can be said to be a critique of organized religion? To what extent can the text be said to represent a commodified view of life?

Definition of Terms

Because of the radical nature of some of the works in our study, dealing with socioeconomic, socio-political issues; because they are conceived by authors with a progressive outlook, and written by advocates of a revolutionary transformation of society; because some of the characters themselves are endowed with liberal, forward-looking attitudes, and a subversive idiom; above all, because of the radical, critical jargon that is part of Marxist aesthetics, it is necessary to define a few technical terms here. The terms include imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism and socialism. At the risk of over-simplification, we here give summative and contiguous definitions of these terms.

Imperialism

It is the extension of the rule and influence by one government, nation, or society over another; the policy of creating, developing and maintaining an empire such that we may find a heterogeneous yoking together of peoples and nationalities under a central political power of superior technological strength.

Colonialism

It is the extension of political and economic control over an area by an occupying state that usually has organizational or technological superiority. The 'mother' country or colonial power maintains strong political ties with her colonies mainly for her own economic benefits; she exploits the natural and economic resources of the colonies to her own advantage. The Spanish, Portuguese, English, French and Dutch established colonies world wide, virtually all of which have since obtained independence

from the imperial systems. Most African countries have been former colonies. While imperialism is broader than colonialism, many writers use both terms interchangeably, as synonyms.

Today, while classic colonialism in the sense of active political and economic domination of one country by another is generally considered immoral, one still hears of imperialism, especially in the economic and cultural sense. But what we hear even more often now is neo-colonialism, (some would say, neo-imperialism).

Neo-colonialism

'New' colonialism is the practice wherein a former colony, now politically independent, is, nonetheless economically controlled by a more developed country or by foreign multinational companies. The directors of these corporations usually are local intermediaries answerable to their foreign bosses as in the case of the Kenya of Ngugi's works.

Capitalism

It is the economic system characterized by private ownership of property and the means of production. Generally, the capitalist or private enterprise system, places emphasis on individual initiative and competition. The capitalists, entrepreneurs, tycoons, or businessmen are all pushed into business by the profit motive. They all want to make profit, to accumulate much money. Under capitalism there are two distinct classes of people: the first class is that of a few but extremely rich people; the other class is made up of the majority of the people who are poor. Socialism is the opposite of capitalism.

Socialism

It is the general term for the political and economic theory that advocates collective or government ownership and management of the means of production and distribution. Instead of crucial economic activities being run by a few rich individuals for their private gains as under capitalism, these are controlled by the government or collectivities to ensure equitable distribution to all members of the society in an effort to bring about social justice.

Marxism

It is the economic and political philosophy formulated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Its main aim is to topple Capitalism with its distinct social classes of the rich and the poor, to do away with social classes of inequalities replacing them with a classless society where people are equal. In other words Marxism is expected to produce Socialism.

As stated in the introductory part of this chapter, this work reviews the literature on Marxist aesthetics to come out with certain Marxist principles and apply these to the analysis of some African literary works including *The Crown of Thorns* by Linus Asong, *God's Bits of Wood* by Ousmane Sembene, *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe, and *Devil on the Cross* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. There is an obvious limitation to applying the Marxist approach to these works, for they are not all written from a socialist perspective, an orientation most amenable to Marxist criticism. For, while *God's Bits of Wood* and *Devil on the Cross* are written largely from a socialist perspective, *The Crown of Thorns* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are not. We therefore do not expect the latter novels to be totally responsive to every principle of Marxist aesthetics.

That notwithstanding, the validity of a critical approach partly resides in its applicability, and its strength ought to be measured in terms of the diversity of artistic works it can be generally applied to, without ceasing to be an instrument that best fits a category of works. We will attempt an analysis of the chosen works in the light of such Marxist concepts as literature and ideology, commitment, history and literature, and realism, a chapter to each text or group of texts.

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PART TWO

PRACTICAL CONCERNS: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

CHAPTER TWO

Ousmane Sembene's

GOD'S BITS OF WOOD*

Set in the late forties, *God's Bits of Wood* is the story of African railway strikers in the area now occupied by the modern republics of Senegal and Mali. The focus of the strike moves from Bamako to Thiès to Dakar, and then Bamako – Thiès – Dakar – Bamako – Thiès, etc. Some of the strike leaders include Doudou, Lahbib and Bakayoko. Their colonial masters are the French and the strikers are agitating for better pay and improved working conditions: family allowances, old age pensions and proper housing. The strikers' wives gradually join their menfolk in the struggle. Ramatoulaye and, later, Penda and Maimouna epitomize the courageous feminine dimension of the fight.

But the management of the railway company headed by such people as Edouard, Dejean and Leblanc reject the workers' demands. Instead they set out to break the people's will, to destroy the unity of the workers by trying to co-opt some of them. Hence the supply of pipe-borne water to the African areas in affected towns is controlled;

rice and other food items are rationed, with little or nothing getting to the strikers. Obviously hunger and thirst stare the Africans in the face. But the people get tougher, and their women physically confront some law-enforcement officers.

Attempts to arrive at a compromise fail as the arrogant management, on the one hand, and the strikers led by the cocky Bakayoko, on the other, face each other, unwilling to give in. Pro-administration African collaborators like the Imam, El Hadj Mabigué and the Deputy Mayor of Dakar fail to persuade the strikers to give up the strike, or accept less than their full demand. Meanwhile, some key strikers are arrested, tortured and imprisoned.

The women undertake an unprecedented long march from Thiés to Dakar, the colonial headquarters. At the huge gathering in Dakar Bakayoko dramatically appeals to all workers to stand up for their rights. At the end of his exhortation in Wolof, the meeting breaks up, with more workers determined to go on strike too. Things get worse, but eventually the management gives in, and the novel ends on a hopeful note when a telegram from Lahbib states that the strikers' demands have been met. The people return to work, and the strike is over.

The main theme of the novel is the economic exploitation of the Africans by the French colonialists, owners of the railway company. And, true to the capitalist spirit, they try to get as much as they can from the African railway workers in return for little pay. Consequently, the workers fight back for improved working conditions. Associated with and emerging from the economic exploitation, an attendant conflict between the exploited African workers and the owners of the railway company is the theme of class struggle: the working class versus the

capitalist bourgeoisie. From within this emerges the theme of unity and steadfastness in the struggle for a just cause, the readiness to fight for the truth. This single sense of purpose leads the people to eventual victory, as their demands are met by the management of the railway company.

Despite the publisher's (Doubleday and Company, Inc.) catching phrase on the cover, "A novel of the independence struggle in French Africa," obviously intended to make the novel more saleable, the author does not set out to treat this attractive political theme per se. The workers call off the strike when their demands are met; there is no attempt to overthrow the colonial regime. However, the political theme is treated indirectly through the economic theme which constituted one of the main grievances that pushed Africans, during the nationalist struggle, to fight for their self-rule. As stated in the introduction to the novel, at the time of the real strike that inspired this story, there were few independent countries in Africa. But "Today there are thirty-eight independent African States of both French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa." (32)

God's Bits of Wood is a novel conceived along a socialist line of thought. In it we have the owners of the means of production, the controllers of the company, pitted against the proletariat, the disgruntled African trainmen. Out of the struggle or interaction between the two classes and their distinct modes of thinking, two ideologies emerge. The trainmen, on the one hand, clamour for equal treatment, fairness and social justice; the management, on the other, would like to keep all the economic and social advantages to themselves and the white workers. Thus, while the underprivileged is socialist in its thinking,

the other is more capitalist, hence the conflicting ideologies.

From the African camp we have such arguments as:

"It is true that we have our trade, but it does not bring us what it should. We are being robbed. Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between us and animals... (42).

...We're the ones who do the work... the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? In what way is a white child better than a black child? In what way is a white worker better than a black worker? They tell us we have some rights, but it is a lie, nothing but a lie! ...It does no good just to look at our pay slips and say that our wages are too small. If we want to live decently we must fight" (43)

From the camp of the company management we have stiff resistance to the workers' demands:

"It was not a question of agreement or disagreement. First they must go back to work; that was all there was to it.

The sound of the telephone rang out in the empty office and Dejean ran to his desk, sank into the leather armchair, and took up the receiver.

"Hello, hello ... yes, speaking ... No, they haven't gone back yet ... No, I won't see them today, or to-morrow either ... what are they asking? A raise in the pay scale four thousand auxiliary workmen, family allowances to these people? The minute they have some money they go out and buy themselves another wife, and the children multiply like flies ... Oh no, I assure you ..." (69-70).

We have here two groups talking at cross-purposes. The intransigence of management, coupled with the repressive and punitive measures it adopts to discipline the striking workers, only add to the workers' resolve. In other words, the people's unattractive material conditions only go to increase their own consciousness. They organize meetings of sensitization and of their own education or the pedagogy of the oppressed. The meetings are led mostly by young people but the older people gradually join them. At such meetings, speeches similar to the excerpts cited above are made. And the supporters of the strike are won over through conviction and logic and out of a sense of social justice. "Meetings were held more frequently, the directors of the union intensified their activities, and everyone swore not to give in" (74).

As the striking workmen, until now the main breadwinners of the families, can no longer earn any salary, as food rationing and the control of water supply by management adversely affect the African masses, the women replace the men as providers of family needs. Unlike in the past, the women now begin to participate in

group discussion. Led by Ramatoulaye, they even carry out attacks against government forces. In the process the women become more aware of their own potentials, a consciousness highly indicative of "Sembene's Marxist-feminist stance." (Opara 87)

This increasing consciousness of their potential is even more manifest in their great role in initiating the march from Thiès to Dakar under the inspiring leadership of Penda. It is this march that gathers popular support and pulls more and more people from villages along the line culminating in a mammoth assembly in Dakar. Bakayoko inspires the huge crowd and sends people away more determined than ever to continue the strike so long as the management does not budge. Here is part of Bakayoko's speech:

... Now it is up to the rest of you – masons, carpenters, fitters, fishermen, duckers, policemen and military men, civil servants and office workers – to understand that this strike is yours too, just as the workers of Dahomey, in Guinea and even in France have already understood it. It depends on you workers of Dakar, whether our wives and our children will ever see a better life. There is a great rock poised across our path; the trainmen will never go back to work until our demands are met. (325)

This is a clear instance of the education of the masses, of the pedagogy of the oppressed. In this way the people's poor working conditions and the quality of their social existence have heightened their consciousness. According to Karl Marx's preface to his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but rather it is their social existence that determines their consciousness.

At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come into conflicts with the existing relations of production or – what is but a legal expression of the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work before. From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution.
(qtd in Beer ix)

Thus the intolerable material conditions of the oppressed workers in the novel have pushed them to rise against their exploiters by means of a strike. The strikers have become, in the process, more and more conscientized, more and more ideologized.

God's Bits of Wood is a clear production of its society, the transformation into art of some of the social and historical realities of the epoch when the areas in which the novel is set were French colonies. France came into contact with Senegal in the late 18th century and by 1910 "all the African kingdoms and empires had been conquered and converted into colonies of France," and French control over this and other West African colonies was more or less completed. (20)

Historically, the religion that dominated the countries that form the main setting of the novel was Islam. The autocratic French colonial government found it expedient to rule the colonial subject through their local religious

leaders. Hence they co-opted some Muslim leaders and sponsored the trip of others to Mecca, in order to make them beholden to the French government. This is why we find pro-administration Muslim leaders in the novel like the Imam of Senegal, and EI Hadj Mabigué, the wicked brother of Ramatoulaye. It is no wonder, therefore, that in the novel the Imam of Senegal should speak palliatively to the disgruntled Africans:

God has decided that we should live side by side with the French *toubabs*, and the French are teaching us things we need. It is not up to us to rebel against the will of God, even when the reasons for that will are a mystery to us. (196-197)

Here is a critique of organized religion. The Imam's discourse is intended to prevent the oppressed and exploited workers from rebelling against the capitalist owners of the means of production. And this is to ensure the continuance and sustenance of the socio-economic inequities between the privileged and the underprivileged, the rich and the poor, the European management and the African workers.

After the Second World War labour unions were formed in France and also in her colonies. In France the major one was the Confédération Générale du Travail (C.G.T.) controlled mostly by the communists. And in the true spirit of revolutionary internationalism the labour movement from the Marxist perspective extends a helping hand to overseas colleagues.

The actual strike which occurred in Bamako in 1947 had the support of the French C.G.T. That is why in the novel we read of foreign financial help from Dahomey, Guinea and even France coming to the fictional strikers.

And the accusation made against the strikers, that they were communist manipulated, although exaggerated, nevertheless had truth in it. Again, listen to the pro-administration Imam:

The people who are really responsible for all this are the communists who are behind the strike – white men, so I am told. You should do everything you can to hunt them out. For my part, I plan to preach a sermon on the subject to the entire community next Friday. (198)

Ousmane Sembene's background certainly provided him with material for the novel. Essentially a self-made man, Ousmane Sembene made it in life through his own personal exertions. As Eustace Palmer (185) says, Sembene did not go through the regular educational system that was the preserve of "prospective middle class assimilés". His proletarian background can easily be sketched: He was a fisherman, a plumber, a bricklayer, a mechanic, a docker and a trade union leader.

There is no doubt that the outlook of a man with such a background should be different from that of those in privileged situations; it does not surprise us that a man like this should write an essentially socialist-oriented novel. For his own experience as a trade union leader, coupled with his first-hand knowledge of the plight of the poor workers, gave him material to write on with conviction and persuasion.

Since it is the product of the social and historical conditions of its society, a socialist-oriented novel, *God's Bits of Wood* is written in the realist mode. For socialist art is, above all, realist art. The novel contains the latent forces, the typical trends and forces that Lukács believes, when fully developed through seriously realized characters and

actions, expose society's inner structure and dynamic. These forces include the members of the management like Edouard, Dejean and Leblanc, with their rigid stand, and very conservative, exploitative and stereotypical attitude towards the Africans. They are faced by the striking workers led by such hardliners as Bakayoko, Tiémoko, Doudou and Lahbib, on the other. The whites are types, and having mostly stereotypical notions of Africans. Talking on the phone with his superior, Dejean, the regional director of the railway company says of the Africans:

"I'll take care of the natives ... thank you, I'm grateful for your confidence; and don't worry, it will be just like the case, we have a powerful ally, hunger... I'm waiting for any assistants now. I sent them out to see what is happening, and then we will make our plans ... I beg your pardon?... But I know them, I assure you, they are children. Twenty years out here – I've had experience with them ... Yes, you are right, there must be a few fanatics behind it – men who have worked them up and are suing them for their own purposes. But they are all alike; they're more interested in titles than in money. I know my Africans."(70)

On the African side, we have typical characters but also individualized ones like Lahbib and Bakayoko. These two at least, put together, are the embodiment of reflection and action.

If truth be told, although Bakayoko with his manner of disregarding destiny or bending it to his will, was the soul of this strike, it was Lahbib, the serious, thoughtful, calm, and modest Lahbib, who was its brain. Lahbib

counted each one of God's bits of wood, weighed them, and balanced them, but the strength that was in them came from Bakayoko (284).

Together the two people constitute the right combination of forces that produce the typical men's activity. "Men's activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action." (Freire 119) Essentially, Lahbib provides the theory, and Bakayoko, provides the action.

So, when, on the one hand, the Europeans with their typical view towards Africans and, on the other hand, determined Africans like Lahbib and Bakayoko, are brought into confrontation through a typical crisis situation like the strike, they are bound, in their sensuously fleshed out forms, to generate other forces like repressive instruments, punitive measures, co-optation, treachery and counteraction, etc., that reveal the society's inner structure and dynamic. They are also bound to produce historically significant social outcomes imbued with the power of "world-historical", that is, events with the power to create or influence history. To the extent that the forces make things different, especially in favour of the masses as shown by the strikers' victory in the novel, they are progressive. Rephrasing Georg Lukács' critical opinion, Terry Eagleton says:

All great art is socially progressive in the sense that ... it realizes the vital 'world-historical' forces of an epoch which make for change and growth, revealing their unfolding potential in its fullest complexity. The realist writer, then penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a

total form and fleshing them out in concrete experience. (Eagleton 29)

The proletariat in the novel are quite aware that they are making history; that they are working towards a change, the change of the status quo, especially in their material or economic condition. But they call off their strike as soon as their demands are met, their victory falling just short of a political victory. For to the extent that their economic victory does not extend to the pure political sphere, their sense of historical optimism is limited.

The "type", according to Lukács, means the convergence of "all the most important social, moral and spiritual contradictions of a time." (qtd in Ngara 16) And for Marx and Engels the true character is one who combines typicality with individuality, the type of creation that is the great strength in Shakespeare's and Balzac's characterization. Thus a typical representative character incarnates historical forces without ceasing to be individualized. In *God's Bits of Wood* these include Bakayoko, Beaugosse, Penda and N'Deye Touti, who incarnate historical forces, that is, who are representative or typical but at the same time are richly individualized. Bakayoko is the type that champions the people's cause, making it almost his personal affair; he is the type that is likely to die a martyr. He is that symbol of courage, determination and fearlessness, the type that can sacrifice the personal for the communal. Yet this very man is mysterious, complex. His magnetic personality sweeps women off their feet, yet he leaves N'deye Touti broken-hearted without a kind word. The man who has a soft spot in his heart for Penda who dies heroically is the son who has not much sympathy for a dead mother. Bakayoko

is the married man who generates warmth and cold towards his wife.

Beaugosse is the type of intellectual who stands for a cause and yet betrays it. He initially sides with the people but later abandons them for the authorities. His relationship with N'deye Touti is what makes him change from a supporter of the people's cause to the people's enemy. He is afraid of Bakayoko because the latter is greatly admired by N'deye Touti. Thus, because Beaugosse hates Bakayoko out of jealousy, he eventually hates the cause Bakayoko stands for.

N'deye Touti herself is the type of Western-educated African girl who looks down on her own people and culture, the type that knows more about the European ways than she does about the African ways. Yet this very girl is emotionally swept off her feet by a pure son of the soil. She abandons the more Western-educated Beaugosse for the local Bakayoko. The girl who should know more about the implication of polygamy goes and confesses her love for a local married man, asking him to accept her as his second wife.

N'deye Touti structures her relationship with the men in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value. What material benefits do I derive from associating with this or that man, she would seem to ask herself; how much social prestige do I gain from being seen with this or that man, one could imagine her asking herself. At the peak of Bakayoko's fame and popularity, N'deye Touti feels she has more social prestige to gain by associating with this polygamous superstar than with Beaugosse. She has a commodified view of life.

Penda the typical prostitute, around whom men flock, can become fully committed to the people's cause and be an inspiration to women who at first referred to her as a mere whore. Penda the woman of uncertain virtues who used to appreciate men's suggestive touches has now become the leader of the women's march. She is now the woman who can seriously slap in the face any man who touches her behind suggestively, etc.

Not all of Sembene's characters are fully developed; it is not necessary that they all should be. The point is that, while some of his characters are types in the ordinary sense of the word, especially the European characters, others, particularly the African ones, combine typicality with individuality, qualities that Marx and Engels admired in Shakespeare's and Balzac's characterization.

Since it has been amply established that this is a novel conceived along a socialist line of thought, it is no longer a question whether or not *God's Bits of Wood* is committed art, for it clearly is. The question rather is whether it overtly or subtly does so, whether it is subjective or objective partisanship? The answer is that the author leans towards objective partisanship.

Even without knowledge of Sembene's proletarian background that took him up to the leadership of workers and made him more disposed to sympathize with or to relate to the lot of workers, enough evidence from the novel shows that the author is committed to the cause of the working class. However, the novelist's voice is seldom heard. Sembene is fairly objective, and whatever he wants to convey, he does so through dialogue and incident; he makes the various characters say it. He creates his characters to criticize and condemn the insensitive

management; he makes the European characters reveal their stupidity, myopia and conservatism.

Yet it comes out clear that the author is on the side of the workers because he creates from their ranks the most admirable characters, respectable because of their courage, determination and presence of mind. To cite only a few examples from among the men, we have the duo of theory and praxis; Lahbib and Bakayoko; from among the women, we have the trio of feminine models: Ramatoulaye, Penda and Maimouna. Above all, the workers' struggle ends positively. In the end victory is on the side of the proletariat, which in itself is enough comment on the virtue of unity in a just cause, of steadfastness in the pursuit of social justice.

The preceding stress is that Marxism is a social, economic and political philosophy with the humanist mission of improving the world. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene's vision is socialist, and therefore basically humanist. He cares for the proletariat. True, by the end of the novel a good number of workers die in the course of the struggle. Such is the fate of Doudou, Penda, Houdia Niakoro, etc.; true, there is much violence committed in the book. But all of these realities are part and parcel of revolutionary struggles; they are the hallmarks of socialist revolutions. The important thing is that in the end the workers have won; their demands have been met and their lives changed for the better. There is no turning back of the hand of the clock. Sembene's text therefore has a good socialist agenda. Ngugi wa Thiong'o lauds Sembene's commitment as follows:

I would like to single out one African writer who exemplifies the kind of commitment that I have been talking about. He is Sembene

Ousmane, a Senegalese, and who gave us *God's Bits of Wood*. Read it – an account of the Senegalese workers' struggle in 1948 – and you'll see how he analyses and then synthesizes; how he is involved in the particular without losing time, you feel that he is with the people, that it is their fate and their eventual triumph in which he is interested. (Ngugi *Writers in Politics* 80)

The narrative structure of the novel roughly follows the layout of the towns along the railway line from Bamako to Dakar. The readers move from one town to another in an apparent disorder. Essentially, they go from Bamako to Thiès and to Dakar; and then Bamako – Thiès – Dakar and finally Thiès. Even with this rough itinerary, some may feel that there is confusion. But there is order: these far flung places are physically linked by the railway line, and therefore by the common effect of the strike, by the union and by the personality who epitomizes the strike, Bakayoko. The linking of widespread areas gives the novel an epic scope in a way in character with the revolutionary spirit – that of involving more and more people, crowds and masses rather than just individuals. It is a setting and narrative structure that favour a mass movement.

Commenting on Sembene's artistry, Eustace Palmer says:

Ousmane's achievement in *God's Bits of Wood* is largely due to his wonderfully controlled artistry. First, there is the quality of his prose. One has to be cautious in discussing the stylistic aspects of a translated work, but a few tentative points can still be made. Ousmane's language is so precise and economical; the choice of

words is so exact. One has the impression of confident mastery of language, not of an uncertain beginner fumbling with words. This is writing which is the product not just of erudition, but of observation and experience. The impression conveyed is that almost every phrase, simile or metaphor is backed by the weight of lived experience and carries an intellectual force ... Here is the most meaningful and convincing dialogue – in the scenes between the workers or between the white characters or between the women. (Palmer 196-197)

True, as Palmer has said, Sembene's wonderful style is partly the result of reading and experience. In Marxist terminology we would even go ahead to expand the experience dimension. Sembene's ability to write as admirably as he does is also the result of his mastery of a socialist ideological perspective that permits him to delve into characters, to go beyond surface phenomena and bring out the realities and essences of situations.

His essentially proletarian background and his role as a one-time union leader would lead one to believe that were Sembene to conceptualize the social and economic situation of his country at the time, he would do so with ease. He would talk in theoretical or conceptual terms that indicated he was aware of the conflict between the capitalist and socialist ideologies that we highlighted earlier. As a novelist, however, Sembene abandons conceptual in favour of experiential writing. While he is thus writing in the fictive mode, however, he has a mastery of the conceptualisation of the issues involved. It is this mastery of the theoretical knowledge of social issues underlying his experiential writing that lends force, insight and

conviction to the latter. It is partly this mastery of an ideological perspective that enables him "to generate such passion, anger and sympathy for the people's sufferings while appearing detached and uninvolved." (*Ibid*)

Writing on *God's Bits of Wood* Emmanuel Ngara says: "on the sociological level, Ousmane successfully demonstrates that the strike has generated a new social psychology, marking a new level of socio-political awareness and a tendency towards democracy, justice and progress." (Ngara 73) The strike leads to meetings of sensitization by the strike leaders, for the benefit of the masses; the people are more conscious of what is happening in the society. It also leads to women being free from their subordinate role in a predominantly Muslim feudal system; the women can now participate in discussions and actions with men for the common interest of their community. This enhanced role of the women produces positive action in the form of the generated mass support for the strike that brings management to its knees. Thanks to people like Bakayoko, the workers have now come to feel proud of their own African culture; Wolof, for example, will no longer be considered inferior to French.

In a general way, all that happens in this novel has a great deal of relevance to today's Africa, the Africa, until now, largely dominated by one-party political structures characterized by less freedom of expression, by dictatorship of the minority, by the oppression and exploitation of the masses. Today, Africa is undergoing a revolution in political thinking in the wake of the wind of change from the East. For, in the final analysis, this is a novel that subtly upholds the virtues of unity of purpose in the struggle for a cause, solid unity and commitment

in the face of a common enemy, in the face of reactionary forces of all forms, economic, social or political.

End Note

*Ousmane Sembene *God's Bits of Wood*, (translated by Francis Price) New York: Double-day.1962, 1970. References to this novel will be taken from this edition.

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CHAPTER THREE

Linus T. Asong's

THE CROWN OF THORNS*

The story, set in a local community known as Small Monje, is a drama of the conflict between the government administrator and the local subjects. The people of Nkokonoko Small Monje, partly influenced by the District Officer, wave aside the rightful heir to the throne of Small Monje, Antony Nkoalek, in favour of his less deserving younger brother, Alexander Nchindia.

The latter protests against being forced to be chief. But the Council of Elders and the D.O. remain impervious to the young man's protestations. And as if to reward them for forcing a crown onto his head, Nchindia is psychologically determined to flout the royal code of conduct. Thus, despite the "crown" on his head, he behaves like a fish out of water. He does nearly everything the wrong way. He commits royal blunders and gaffes, and does not, indeed, give a damn to any royal consideration.

The only exception to this apparent, unconscionable behaviour is in Nchindia's relationship vis-à-vis his

supplanted brother. Nchindia is worried about accepting a throne that is his brother's rightful inheritance. He writes sentimental, apologetic letters to Antony Nkoalek on the issue, to clear himself of any complicity in ousting the rightful heir. Unfortunately, as ill-luck would have it, the letters never reach their destination.

Nchindia's unethical behaviour is underscored by such acts as wearing jeans and casual clothes on ceremonial occasions; smoking cigarettes rather than using the royal pipe; publicly quarreling or even coming close to fighting with ordinary citizens; turning a deaf ear to the seasoned advice of the Council of Elders; disregarding royal retinue in his outings; suspected of philandering with women of uncertain virtues; marrying a tabooed woman, etc.

All of these are very serious crimes, indeed, especially in an area where tradition prescribes strict royal observance while proscribing any social deviance. Yet the people of Small Monje are willing to go an extra mile with their wayward Chief, in the hope that he may turn over a new leaf. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The acme of Nchindia's royal levity, the nadir of his royal disrepute is reached when he assists the D.O. in the stealing and selling to a foreigner, of *Akeukeuor*, the god of gods, the spiritual symbol and the cultural soul of his own people. The people's verdict is final: the wages of Nchindia's sins is death! His unenviable qualities make Nchindia an anti-hero.

The people equally have a few grievances against the arrogant, insensitive D.O.: the D.O. turns a deaf ear to their complaints against the church for partly expropriating their land; the D.O. imposes a rejected Chief on them; the D.O. is suspected of having a hand in Achiebefuo's death. Above all, like Nchindia, the D.O. has committed the

unpardonable crime of stealing and selling *Akeukeuor*. And for him, like for Nchindia, the people's final word is death.

But before the people commit this ultimate act, they carry out, as a means of demonstrating their anger against an insensitive administration, acts of civil disobedience: they boycott church services and the market; they have rebelled against the government. Finally, in a cave at a nearby mountain they murder their wilful chief, the high-handed D.O. and his policemen, and the unfatherly Father Preston. The novel ends with the people having the final word, though plagued with anxiety.

The basic subject matter of *The Crown of Thorns* is administration in a local community, the relationship between the District Officer and the people he is called forth to rule. As we the readers experience the imaginative actions and reactions of the virtual characters to their various stimuli, as we examine the subject matter of the novel, we notice that a central proposition runs through the book, that a set of general ideas seems to have been at the bottom of the conception of the story. Though not explicitly stated, this central proposition is experientially and adequately illustrated in the conflict between the two camps.

If we were to crystallize this proposition or theme, it could be stated as follows: the lack of genuine dialogue between the administration and the ruled. There is substantial evidence that the two camps are at cross - purposes. The local people have serious complaints to lay before the government, regarding issues crucial to their material and spiritual life, but the government adopts a rather contemptuous attitude towards them. The government (through the D.O.) behaves as if the people's views do not count at all. The D.O. goes around imposing his will on the people, adopting thus an oppressor mentality,

the very repressive ideology, the very mode of thinking in the way they take their destiny into their hands and deal a deadly blow to the authorities, marking, in the process, a clean break with the past. The writer and scholar, Wole Soyinka, is occasionally quoted for saying something to this effect: he who makes peaceful change impossible, makes violent change inevitable. As physics students who have studied Newton's Laws of Motion often say "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The dominant ideology in the text, authoritarianism, has provoked an equal and opposite ideology, radicalism. L. T. Asong the novelist has thus produced a counter textual ideology, radicalism, to challenge the dominant textual ideology, authoritarianism. A critical act has been carried out and the people seem to be forward-looking. It is hard for one to accept Father Preston's pessimistic interpretation of the people's action in terms of pure retrogression. (188) On the contrary, one can speculate, albeit beyond the scope of *The Crown of Thorns*, that things will not be the same again in Small Monje.

From this erupts the other Marxist concept of commitment in art. A central concern in socialist literature and Marxist Criticism is the idea that a writer should commit his art to the cause of the proletariat. But although most Marxists believe that there is nothing like art for art's sake, and that art ought to serve the cause of life, they disagree on the manner of commitment. While some call for overt commitment of literature to the cause of the masses, others call for a more subtle commitment; while there are supporters of subjective partisanship, there are proponents of objective partisanship.

With reference to *The Crown of Thorns* there is commitment on the part of the author although it is not

the overt type. This lies in the text's structural organization. By arranging his novelistic material to end with the masses having the final word, the author places emphasis on the people's action. He subtly and unobtrusively points to the type of impression with which he would like the reader to close the novel, the type of attitude with which he should leave the work. If our line of reasoning is correct, we can then conclude that the author stands opposed to domination, oppression or exploitation of the masses. He is inviting us to criticise and condemn the repressive social forces in place.

In the final analysis, however, Asong is a social critic rather than a socialist writer. He is a critical realist, largely objective in his attitude towards his characters but skilfully revealing his sympathy for the suffering masses through the artistic organization of his compositional material for a specific effect, for emphasis. And this points to a possible direction in the interpretation of the novel.

It is a basic tenet in Marxist criticism that literature or art is the social and historical product of the society producing it: that works of art are socially and historically conditioned; they are not just mysteriously inspired or solely explainable on the basis of the psychology of their creators. Though set in a local community and not substantially embracing the national territory as a whole, *The Crown of Thorns* is a unique transformation into art of some of the social and historical realities of contemporary Cameroon. For example, the novel's plot might partly have been inspired by the actual stealing and selling to an American art collector of the *Afo-A-Kom* in the mid 60s, an event that involved the odyssey from Kom to New York and back to Kom of the invaluable statue that made headlines in artistic news around the world.

It is a common fact of history that until recently, political leaders have ruled Cameroon with more or less an iron hand, an administrative cue taken up by the D.Os when they come to deal directly with the masses under them in the division. Like *Goment* in the novel, the D.Os are virtual dictators who remain largely insensitive to the needs of their subjects.

In the context of what was happening in Africa in the early 1990s, and particularly in Cameroon with its rather strange phenomenon of ghost towns involving strikes and civil disobedience, what happens at the end of *The Crown of Thorns* has sort of foreshadowed these nation-wide strikes. Needless to say this is a pointer to what can happen to any society when there is an absence of genuine dialogue, when there is total breakdown of communication between the government and the ruled, a classic situation in which the Cameroonian uncomfortably finds himself or herself. This, in a way, is the prophetic dimension of Asong's novel. Could a novel be more topical? Could a work be more socially significant? We believe that it is partly in this sense that Professor Arnold's observation on the novel can be understood, and it is this, that the book "... has a message for man in a century as perilous as this!" (Blurb)

As a realist work, Asong's novel reveals another quality valued in Marxist criticism – that of the "world-historical". According to Georg Lukács, a realist work is one rich in complex relations between man, nature and history. (Eagleton 28) These relations embody and reveal what is most typical about a particular phase of history. What Lukács refers to as typical are the "latent forces that in every society are the most significantly historical and progressive and that expose society's inner structure and

dynamic." (*Ibid*) The duty of the realist writer is to flesh out these typical trends and forces in sensuously realized characters and actions. In this way he "links the individual to the social whole, and informs each concrete particular of social life with the power of "world-historical, the significant movements of history itself". (*Ibid*)

In *The Crown of Thorns* typical characters like Ngobefuo, Ngangabe, Nchindia and the council of Elders on the one hand, and the D.O. and Rev. Father Preston on the other, coupled with the typical circumstances their psychologies generate in their complex relations, represent these latent forces. In their sensuously fleshed-out forms they produce historically significant social outcomes, social events that become imbued with the power of "world-historical". That is, events that possess the stuff out of which significant historical movements are made.

In this analysis, there is the very neat logical link between the strike, boycott, and violence in the novel and the similar phenomenon in the Cameroon and Africa of the 1990s, within the broader context of the wind of change from Eastern Europe, especially when such imaginative events precede the actual historical ones, particularly when the former prefigure the latter.

Despite the social and historical significance of the imaginative experience of *The Crown of Thorns*, however, the virtual characters are not imbued with a sense of historical optimism; they are not highly conscientized or quite aware that they could be helping to make history move forward. But any absence of a high degree of revolutionary consciousness should not be seen as a weakness. To do so would be grossly unfair to Asong; to do so would amount to condemning Asong for what he did not set out to do in the first place. Indeed, it would be

a wrong, rigorous application of an aesthetic approach to the wrong work, no matter how competent and incisive such an analysis may be. Asong's is not a socialist work that can be adequately responsive to Marxist criticism.

Those familiar with *Socio-Artistic Criticism of the African Novel* will have noticed that what we have done so far with regard to *The Crown of Thorns* has largely been centred on matter rather than manner; that we have been less concerned with form than with content. This is not an oversight, for Marxist criticism, as commonly practiced, is a content-oriented aesthetics. True, genuine Marxist critics consider the dialectical relationship between form and content, but place a little more emphasis on content.

Our discussion on artistry will be partly centred on critical observations already made on the novel by some professors. From the point of view of narrative technique *The Crown of Thorns* is written from the third person point of view, with the events of part II revealed through the flashback technique. Asong is objective, and he adopts the dramatic method by bringing the various characters to interact through dialogue and incident, to put forward and defend their views. Asong's voice is seldom heard; in other words, he does not take sides although he artistically works his material in a way that makes us believe his sympathies are with the maltreated people of Nkokonoko Small Monje. The more prominent views are those of Ngobefou, Nchindia, and the D.O.

We have already quoted Professor Arnold in connection with the novel's message. We would like to quote here the other critics:

"...There is a certain self-assured confidence in Asong's handling of plot and characterization that usually goes with maturity and experience. We

are not surprised by events and their outcome, we are carefully prepared and everything moves on towards an almost inevitable climax of horror”.

Richard Bjornson.

... there is something irresistible in the author's style, his sense of structure, and crisp characterization, something that makes it impossible for you to stop reading until you have turned the last page... (Blurb)

Prof. Douglas Killam.

By and large the above comments relating to Asong's artistic strengths are accurate. His handling of structure, plot and characterization is, indeed, admirable. Marxist critics would say that Asong's ability to write well is not just a matter of possessing a good prose style. They would add that it is equally the result of Asong having at his disposal an ideological perspective, such as we have highlighted, that can penetrate to the realities of the characters and situations depicted in the novel. It is a question of having dipped the arrow in the marksman's blood, of being drunk with a certain perception and thus inevitably bringing it out exactly.

In the true spirit of objective criticism, in dwelling on Asong's artistic strengths we should also mention, in passing, a few flaws. And these include:

- 1) An over use of intensifiers, those leaches that suck the blood of words in the pond of prose, especially the adverb "very". (Strunk *et al* 73)
- 2) Readability suffers slightly in Part II of the pace set in Part I but resumed in Part III. (Wache 27)
- 3) Lack of enough justification on the part of both the Council of Elders and the D.O. to back up their

rejection of Anthony Nkoalek for the throne, considering that Nkoalek had been groomed for the office since childhood.

Yet these are superficial weaknesses when placed side by side with his architectonic management of structure and compelling plot development. The weaknesses devolve on editorial lapses rather than on artistic and content accuracy.

End Note

*Linus Tongwo Asong *The Crown of Thorns*. Limbe: Cosmos Educational Publishers, 1990. References to this novel will be taken from this edition.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Chinua Achebe's

ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

Anthills of the Savannah is set in a fictional Anglophone contemporary West African state known as Kangan ruled by a military regime that had previously overthrown a civilian one. At the head of the government is His Excellency the President, who virtually dictates to his largely cowering and sycophantic cabinet ministers. Anyone who dares to challenge him or who refuses to toe the line risks not only his duty post but also his own life.

Apart from His Excellency, the other central characters in the novel, are Chris Oriko, Commissioner for Information, Ikem Osodi, the Editor of the National Gazette, and Beatrice Okoh, Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Ikem, the idealist, is the most radical of the three. He puts out crusading editorials against vices and malpractices in Kangan, often championing the cause of the ordinary citizens, the underdogs, the down-trodden who are largely left out when it comes to sharing the national cake.

The plot of the novel runs that Abazon, a drought-stricken region of Kangan is notorious for having stood out, two years ago, against the idea of making the Head of state President for life. In anger the president had stopped infrastructure underway to bring pipe-borne water to the parched Far North Province. Continued drought and the encroaching desert make life unlivable, unbearable to the Abazonians. Consequently, they send a delegation to declare their loyalty, to toe the line, to offer their belated "yes" in favour of life presidency, in the hope that the Head of State will order work to continue to bring pipe-borne water to their scorched region.

IKem Osodi, a native of Abazon, and quite apart from the fact that his human nature naturally disposes him to sympathize, to empathize with suffering humanity, is understandably drawn towards the frustrated and suffering Abazonians. He meets members of the delegation and holds a discussion session with them. This meeting eventually costs him his job; he is suspended from the editorial board of the National Gazette on the ground that he planned the "recent March" on the presidential Palace by "agitators claiming to come from Abazon". The leaders of the Abazonian delegation are thrown into the Bassa Maximum security Prison.

Ikem is enraged. As a guest speaker at the University, he stirs, inspires, and challenges students to think for themselves and not just be robots, automatons. His intrepidity and revolutionary zeal land him in further trouble; he is abducted from his home and murdered secretly by the police who now go after his friends and sympathizers, Chris and Emmanuel, the Students' Union President. These two assume disguises to get out of the police security net and move northwards. And soon they

receive news of a coup d'état in which His Excellency has been killed, and Major General Lango, declared the new Head of State. Chris melodramatically meets his own death when he courageously stands his ground against a mean police officer whose lust has been foiled, but whose lethal gunshot ends Chris's life. The novel ends with Beatrice serving as the lynchpin of a group of Ikem's and Chris's sympathizers, a group that toasts for people and ideas.

The subject matter of *Anthills of the Savannah* is, simply, military rule in contemporary Africa. From it emerge themes including ruthless dictatorship, insecurity of political critics, emasculation of intellectuals, corruption and economic exploitation, the general gullibility of the masses, and the cynicism of some of them. In a regime like that of Kangan morality of action is not something of which those who matter in the politics or economics of the day concern themselves with. Paucity of morality, total absence of the need to render accountability for political, economic or amoral action mark out the regime.

The reservation earlier made with regard to Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* not having been written from a socialist perspective needs to be reiterated here; and that such being the case, the Marxist approach could not fully apply to them in the way that it would to *God's Bits of Wood* or *Devil on the Cross*. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, like Asong's *The Crown of Thorns*, is written in the critical realist mode rather than from a socialist viewpoint. This does not, however, rule out the possibility of a reasonable appreciation of Achebe's novel from a Marxist perspective.

The recurrent Marxist principle is that all art emanates from an ideological conception of the world, that no work of art is conceived within an ideological vacuum. What

then is the nature of the ideology of the epoch that *Anthills of the Savannah* makes us "see" or "perceive"? What is the nature of the social mentality of the time, or the mode of thinking of the period reflected by this novel?

To get answers to these questions we must examine the relations between the people in the society the novel depicts, the relationship between the ruling class and the ruled, the governing class and the governed. The preambuling notion earlier noted is that the dominant ideas of an epoch are usually the ideas of the ruling class. It is crystal clear that the ruling class in Kangan is the military, and politically the ideology that the novel reveals can be said to be military despotism, a bourgeois set-up in which all power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual, His Excellency. This is stressed by the yam-and-the-knife motif, a metaphor for total control, for complete ownership of all that matters in the welfare of the citizens and the state.

His Excellency has a cabinet of Ministers, no doubt; but everybody knows whose opinion counts when it comes to critical issues. The Ministers at such moments have no real voice unless it is that of uttering flattery in favour of the Head of State. It is a cabinet that does not engage in genuine debate at all; there is no give-and-take between the cabinet members and His Excellency. In important issues there is only the taking of all that the Head of State has to dictate; everybody knows that His Excellency's word is incontrovertible. You dare not raise an objection to his point of view. You dare not tender a letter of resignation of your post, unless such was the idea of His Excellency. That explains why, for all his dissatisfaction with all that is going on in Kangan, Chris cannot easily quit his post as Commissioner of Information. That explains the

obsequious behaviour before the Head of State of the cabinet Ministers who, by the way, are compared to little crawling, puny insects that can be easily crushed under the ponderous foot of the Head of State.

To maintain your post in his administration you have to combine talent and flattery; but often flattery alone does the trick. That explains the behaviour of Professor Okong and the Attorney General. His Excellency can appoint a person to a post or dismiss him at will. He is answerable to none but himself.

The regime does not favour objective truth tellers and critics of its system. The truth that matters is the official version that comes from the regime's information media. That is why they tell lies about Ikem's manner of struggle with law enforcement officers and his eventful death. As such the regime is out to track down those who pass alternative versions of information to foreign news network. The loquacious Abazonian delegation leader tells the real truth about how they feel about the Head of state only to be thrown into the Bassa Maximum Security Prison. Ikem the crusader of truth and social justice is murdered, and his supporters are pursued by the state police.

Although there is not much emphasis on this in the novel, the national bourgeoisie is in tacit co-operation with an imperialist power like the U.S. Witness the Head of State's tolerant attitude towards the female American journalist who understandably castigates those Kangan critics who sound Marxist, and who admire Cuba's Fidel Castro. Through this journalist the two major forms of economy in the world come into play: capitalism and socialism. She projects some of the virtues of capitalism while criticizing socialism. We should add here, in passing,

that the mode of production of material life in Kangan is capitalist.

Criticizing Marxism, the American journalist says:

Yes, Johnson kindly showed me some comments earlier in the week. The editor who I hear is a Marxist of sorts appears to imagine he can eat his cake as well as have it, as we all tend to do this side of democracy. Admiring Castro may be fine if you don't have to live in Cuba or even Angola. But the strange fact is that Dr. Castro, no matter what he says, never defaults in his obligations to the international banking community... what we must remember is that banks are not houses of charity. They are there to lend money at a fair and reasonable profit. If you deny them their margin of profit by borrowing and not paying back they will soon have to shut down their operations and we shall all go back to saving our money in grandmother's piggy banks. (78-79)

The social mentality that emerges from the book reflects the attitudes exhibited by the despotic regime under His Excellency, an oppressive power structure that does not care much about the welfare of the oppressed. Against these dominant ideas we can place the less dominant, the unpopular, if radical, ideas held by Ikem. In fact, Ikem is radical only because he finds himself within a conservative, despotic regime. In a freer or more liberal society Ikem would not be more than an ordinary critic of the system.

Ikem writes crusading editorials in favour of the oppressed; he writes condemning brutal practices fostered by the regime like the firing squad, and he challenges

university students to be more critical rather than accepting without questioning all that the government says. In purely ideological matters, in matters of politics, for example, Ikem offers no immediate alternative in lieu of the present dispensation. Though he is called a Marxist by the American journalist, Ikem does not propose a socialist option to the military despotism. He does not think that the solution lies in a violent revolutionary takeover since, according to him, a revolution already has its potential dictators in the making, who will soon assert themselves as oppressors over the masses. Revolution yes, but the millennium afterwards, no way.

So what can be the solution? Well, Ikem proposes a process of gradual reform. "Society is an extension of the individual. The most we can hope to do with a problematic individual psyche is to reform it. No responsible psycho-analyst would aim to do more" Piecemeal reform seems to be one of the most promising ways to a possible solution. This is so because even a one-day-old baby does not lend itself for easy genetic technological reform, since it comes to the world with its own baggage of irreducible genes. Besides, what is at issue, contends Ikem, may not be systems but a basic human failing which can be ameliorated only through a general dose of political education, political experience. Its growth will be slow and it will need patience, but in it lies eventual hope. However, the slowness of the process is no excuse for political lethargy or apathy.

None of this is a valid excuse for political inactivity or apathy. Indeed to understand it is an absolute necessity for meaningful action, the knowledge of it being the only protective inoculation we can have against

false hopes and virulent epidemics of gullibility (...100).

Essentially, Ikem stands for a good political education, a reasonable political sensitization of the populace and the oppressed. Hopefully, a well-educated masses and a sound politically conscious people would then come to forge out their own acceptable political system.

Anthills of the Savannah is an artistic product of the social and historical realities of post-independence Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Within the corpus of Achebe's fiction and in terms of thematic affinity, this novel belongs to the same category as *A Man of the People*. What Chinua Achebe himself says of the latter has some relevance for *Anthills of the Savannah*:

A Man of the People is a rather serious indictment – if you like – on post-independence Africa... if you take the example of Nigeria which is the place I know best, things had got to such a point politically that there was no other answer – no way you could resolve this impasse politically. The political machine had been so abused that whichever way you pressed it, it produced the same result; and therefore you wanted another force, another force just had to come in. Now when I was writing *A Man of the People* it wasn't clear to me that this was going to be necessarily a military intervention. It could easily have been a civil war, which in fact very nearly was in Nigeria. (Duerden *et al* 13-14)

The above facts are worked into the imaginative experience of *A Man of the People*. Here we learn that political independence has come and the white colonial master has gone away; political power is now in the hands

of Nigerians, in the hands of Africans. And it is an index of their political incompetence that at the end of the novel the civilian rulers in power have been overthrown in a coup d'état by the military. The ousted regime was corrupt through and through: bribery and corruption were rife everywhere, and so was the rigging of elections.

These are some of the ills that have come to characterize most of post-independence Africa. With reference to Nigeria, and quite apart from the fact that historically speaking a military coup did take place there only months following the publication of *A Man of the People*, a civil war did follow, into the bargain in 1967. Nigeria has had not only one but several coups since the first one in 1966: its government has gone from the civilian to the military and back to the civilian and then to the military again, etc. This phenomenon is not peculiar to Nigeria; several African countries have experienced it too.

Therefore, what we have in *A Man of the People* is disillusionment on the part of the people in their own political leaders; the masses are disappointed. The white man has gone and the African has taken over political power. But things have not changed for the better. The civilian rulers are no good, so the military have stepped in to rescue the situation. But how good are the military themselves? How efficient are they politically in their military efficiency? How morally upright are they in the execution of the political and economic affairs of the state? These and many more are the questions treated imaginatively in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

The military dictatorship depicted in the novel is certainly not one that inspires hope at all. Despotic, reactionary and intolerant of criticism, it is essentially morally bankrupt. At the end of the novel, there is another

coup d'état led by General Lango, which simply replaces the one previously headed by His Excellency, and we can safely guess that things generally remain the same. Again, this is a fictional version of the social and historical realities of Nigeria and many African countries, an artist's view of the actual socio-political occurrences in post-independence Africa, Africa with its cycle of coups.

Faced with these sometimes vicious cycles of coups, many in contemporary Africa are beginning to ask themselves a lot of difficult questions. What next? What do we now do? After the civilians have failed and the military too, where do we go from here? After the men have failed to sustain just and viable political systems can we dare to try the women? In fact these are issues that Achebe artistically, subtly and indirectly raises in his book; they are concerns that he explores in his novel. He never provides answers but only explores and probes. As one of his characters says, "writers don't give prescriptions: writers give headache". The ultimate social significance of *Anthills of the Savannah* lies in the fact that it raises several relevant questions about our current political problems and helps to keep every thinking African racking his or her brain for an acceptable alternative to the present dispensation.

Chinua Achebe is a committed writer; although he is not as radically committed a writer as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he is committed all the same. In one of his polemical essays Achebe made the now famous pronouncement:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his

burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (Achebe *Morning Yet* 78)

As far as *Anthills of the Savannah* is concerned Achebe has been faithful to his own dictum by facing squarely some of the "big social and political issues of contemporary Africa." In this particular case it is the basic subject matter of military despotism in contemporary Africa with themes emerging such as ruthless dictatorship, insecurity of political critics, emasculation of intellectuals, and the gullibility of the masses. The work is, to the last a scathing political satire on military dictatorship in contemporary Africa.

One satirical weapon Achebe uses effectively is humour, subtle humour or bitter humour, the humour with a sharp, cutting edge, the derision or ridicule employed at the expense of the cringing, crawling, grovelling, fawning and sycophantic Cabinet Ministers. At other times this humour rises to a higher level of bitterness and takes on the darker coloration of sarcasm like the type revealed by the remarks of the drunk in the Abazonian territory, proposing an outright return to the former colonial masters since Africans cannot control their own destiny. One example of the first brand of humour is contained in the passage describing the cowardly behaviour of eleven intelligent, educated men and the cabinet members of His Excellency's government. The behaviour of the timid Cabinet members before His Excellency is likened to that of puny, insecure, frightened insects with all that is implicit in that analogy. Towards the end of Chapter 17 the news of the latest coup is being celebrated with drinks. Chris is eager to know what has become of the President:

"Did they say anything about the President?"

The sergeant looked at him suspiciously. "Why

you de make all this cross-examination? Wetin concern poor man like you and President, eh? I say wetin concern vulture and barbar?" He was clearly enjoying the attention. "Anyways the President done disappear. They no fit find am again. They say unknown persons enter Palace and kitnap am. So make everybody de watch proper for this check point". He burst out into another peal of laughter taking his willing hearers. "This our country na waa. I never hear the likeness before. A whole President de miss; like old woman de waka for village talk say him goat de miss. This Africa na waa!"

"No be you tell white-man make he commot?" asked somebody from the crowd. "Ehe, white man done go now, and hand over to President. Now that one done loss for inside bush. Wetin we go do again?" "We go make another President. That one no hard," said a third person. "He no hard, eh? Next to-morrow they go tell you say your new President climb palm-tree and no fit come down again", said the second man to a tremendous outburst of laughter. He was obviously a wit to reckon with, and knew it.

"So wetin we go do now?" "Make everyman, and woman, and child and even those them never born, make everybody collect twenty manilla each and bring to me and I go take am go England and negotiate with IMF to bring white man back to Kangan." (213)

Along with the depiction of the minister's behaviour, the passage is crucial as far as part of the meaning of the novel is concerned; for it reveals the author's attitude

towards his subject matter. This is your Africa for you, Achebe seems to be saying. Africa where clever, intelligent ministers become nothing but a bunch of yes men, stooges jockeying for positions of influence; your Africa of incompetent political leaders whose incompetence leads to a vicious cycle of coups.

There is yet another brand of humour, the kind in which a character engages unintentionally in an ironic self-condemnation, through his speech, revealing his own spinelessness, his grovelling puny nature. This is even more revealing when it has to do with an apparently intelligent Cabinet Minister turned worshipper of the Head of State. The two examples are Professor Okong and Attorney General. A little common-place comment made by the Head of State would have been just what it is to any intelligent person: a trite observation. But to Professor Okong it becomes an occasion for him to suddenly transform the President into a guru, a master of great wisdom. "Your Excellency is not only our leader but also our Teacher. We are always ready to learn" (18).

To ingratiate himself with the Head of State, to get into His Excellency's good graces, the Attorney-General has to cheapen himself beyond expectation; he has to demean himself, to stoop so low in order to conquer! Listen to him make a contrast between the likes of him and those of the quality of His Excellency:

As for those like me, Your Excellency, poor dullards who went to bush grammar schools, we know our place, we know those better than ourselves when we see them. We have no problem worshipping a man like you. Honestly I don't. You went to Lord Lugard College where half of your teachers were Englishmen. Do you

know, the nearest whitemen I saw in my school were an Indian and two Pakistanis. Do you know, Your Excellency, that I was never taught by a real whiteman until I went to read law at Exeter in my old age as it were. I was thirty-one. You can't imagine, Your Excellency, how bush people like me were. During my first year in Britain I saw Welsh Rarebit on the menu one fine day and I rubbed my hands together and my mouth began to water because I thought I was going to eat real bush-meat from the forests of Wales!

(24)

To be sure, Achebe the critical realist may not be an ardent social reformer in the manner of a revivalist preacher. However, from his satirical breast springs this basic desire to see erring humanity amend its foibles. When Achebe holds areas of society up to ridicule, the ball implicitly rolls to the court of the guilty, his satirical butts. A great artist of Achebe's stature would not crudely say, "hey you there, change your behaviour or else ..." No, he rather does so artistically, providing the satirical criticism and victims in life provide the social improvement. This basic approach of the satirist reveals the creative writer's commitment to social issues and the common good of the community.

Achebe uses three other narrators in his novel to achieve a certain effect. They are Beatrice, Chris and Ikem, three intelligent large-hearted and, therefore, respectable people who know what they are saying. Through them Achebe condemns attitudes and people in society that are obnoxious. He puts subjective statements in the narrators' mouths and still maintains his aesthetic distance. Chris can call Professor Okong a "buffoon"; but Achebe could not. Ikem can call Okong a "Rasputin"; Achebe could not. As a

subjective narrator Ikem can lament the sorry state of the national economy and talk of "leaders who openly looted our treasury, whose effrontery soiled our national soul" (42). We will never hear such a statement from Achebe the novelist; it can only come from Achebe the pamphleteer, the essayist, the writer of *The Trouble With Nigeria*.

However, what these intelligent narrators condemn or criticise is what Achebe would like changed in society. Hence the commitment of his art to social causes. The subtle treatment of such didactic themes as the virtue of struggle; the need to fight for just causes; Ikem's philosophy of piecemeal reforms and the political education of the masses; the exploration of a possible new role for the woman in contemporary African society, etc., is a clear evidence of Achebe's commitment to social improvement.

The reading of *Anthills of the Savannah* is likely to raise the questions, especially given the role of Beatrice within the entire logic of the plot of the novel: What next? What do we now do? After the military have failed and the civilians too, where do we go from here? After the men have failed to sustain a just and viable political system, can we dare to try women? A novel that is capable of raising, in the minds of the intelligent readers, these questions, must be the work of a man with great concern for the welfare of men, the lot of humanity, a man with a certain degree of commitment to the common good of society.

Chinua Achebe is a moderately committed artist, however, quite different from the "world-acclaimed Marxist literary giant, Ngugi wa Thiong'o." (Emenyonu Blurb) While Achebe would be more likely to advocate gradual political reform, Ngugi wa Thiong'o would be more likely to go for a radical and total political reform. Achebe the artist is wary of making definite political statements or assuming a

radical ideological position that would point the way to clear solutions to political problems. He prefers to artistically explore political issues. "The exploration itself is a political statement: why do you think I should tell you what kind of government Nigeria should have? I am not a political scientist." (*African Concord* 1987)

The greatness of *Anthills of the Savannah* as a novel has not come about by chance, but as the end result of conscious but subtle artistry at work. Chinua Achebe uses a complex narrative technique which (although it causes initial readability problems) turns out to be aesthetically effective. It allows Achebe to achieve certain effects while maintaining his aesthetic distance, to employ subjectivity through other narrators while respecting his usual objectivity. Achebe thus objectifies subjectivity: we know that the imaginative experience he evokes was inspired by his personal experience of the realities of his immediate society, but it is conveyed to us in a way that his personal feelings and sentiments do not come in, a highly valued quality in literary criticism.

Achebe uses biting humour to lend sparkle to his prose, to enhance the readability of the novel and, above all, to achieve satirical effects. There is functional use of oral material. Through the technique of pertinent use of folktale such as the story of the leopard and the tortoise, he makes us fully aware of the necessity of struggle as a major theme in the novel. In the same scheme he uses dryness to signify physical drought, on the one hand, and spiritual dryness or moral aridity of Kangan society, on the other.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, therefore, Achebe depicts the socioeconomic and military forces that oppress the indigent masses of Kangan society. On the one hand the

textual or authorial ideology is the repressive military despotism that the author invites us to condemn. And this is done through the highly critical editorials written by Ikem Osodi as well as his fiery addresses to initially naïve university students. These radical discourses are all intended for the education of the masses for critical consciousness. On the other hand, the aesthetic ideology of the novel is critical realism which enables Achebe to depict his characters and situations fully and completely, while maintaining his aesthetic distance, since he has objectified his subjectivity.

End Note

*Chinua Achebe *Anthills of the Savannah*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd., 1988. References to the book will be taken from this edition.

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CHAPTER FIVE *

IDEOLOGY IN THREE DRAMATIC WORKS: VICTOR EPIE NGOME'S *WHAT GOD HAS PUT ASUNDER*, AND BATE BESONG'S *BEASTS OF NO NATION AND REQUIEM FOR THE LAST KAISER*.

This chapter seeks to explain the three Anglophone Cameroonian dramatic texts under discussion from both the Marxist ideological and aesthetic perspectives, showing how these are rooted in the social and general history of the authors' epoch. At the risk of oversaying, we here review and contextualize Marxist concepts to these plays. The well-known Marxist model of society consists of the economic base and the superstructure. The base is made up of the material means of production, distribution and exchange, while the superstructure is the 'cultural world of ideas, art, religion, law and so on' (Barry 158). According to Marxist scholars, the elements of the superstructure are not 'innocent' but invariably shaped or determined by the economic base.

Coined by a French man, Antoine Destutt de Tracy in 1796, the term 'idéologie' (ideology) was fated to develop fully in the hands of Marxists like Karl Marx, Lenin, Antonio Gramsci and others, hence its centrality in Marxist Criticism today. A slippery term that does not have a single accepted definition but rather rival definitions, 'ideology' is considered by David McLellan to be 'the most elusive concept in the whole of the social sciences' (qtd in Heywood [1992] 2003:5).

The impossibility of an easy definition thus indicated, the definition chosen for the purpose of this study, which will be modified in the course of the discussion, is the one proposed by Andrew Heywood:

Ideology is a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power. All ideologies therefore (a) offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a 'world-view' (b) advance a model of desired future, a vision of the 'good society,' and (c) explain how political change can and should be brought about – how to get from (a) to (b). (*Ibid*: 12).

A weapon sometimes used by people to criticize or condemn those with a rival set of ideas or beliefs, ideology possesses an emotional and affective character since it is a means of expressing people's hopes and fears as well as their aspirations and sympathies.

The objective world is out there, but the way we see or interpret it is due to our ideology; for, according to Heywood, we 'look at the world through a veil of theories.

presuppositions and assumptions that shape what we see and thereby impose meaning on the world' (*Ibid*:13). And when we sometimes accuse others of being 'ideological' even when we are guilty of the very sin, adds Heywood, it is because in making us see the world through a 'veil' of assumptions, ideology is 'effectively invisible'.

Radical critics with unpopular "social priorities" are often regarded as "ideological", says Terry Eagleton. For him this is because 'ideology is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own' (Eagleton 1983:211). Elsewhere Eagleton stresses that 'Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole ... the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world' (Eagleton 1976:16, 17, 18). In the preface to the latter work, Eagleton affirms that literature is a vector of ideology when he says 'ideologies [are] the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature.'

The link between literature and ideology, though subtle, is one that we must try to grasp. On the one hand 'vulgar' Marxists generally hold that literature is nothing but ideology in different form, that literary works are the expressions of the dominant ideologies of their time. But other Marxists counter this claim by asserting that a great deal of literature challenges the ideology it confronts. However, as one of the forms of social consciousness within the superstructure, literature has a unique relationship with ideology (Ngara 21). According to Engels as quoted by Eagleton (1976:16) 'art is far richer and more 'opaque'

than political and economic theory because it is less purely ideological'.

The fact is that the basic material with which the literary artist works is essentially ideological. But in creatively working on it, he gives the ideology a definite shape and form in a way peculiar to literary art. The finished fictional product, as art, distances itself from the ideology that gave it birth (Eagleton 1976:19). What such a creative work makes us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' (in imaginary ways) is the ideology of the world from which it springs. Yet the work can also transform that ideology when it interrogates, when it challenges it. Therefore, from an ideological conception of a world a creative work is born, but which work, depending on the class or social group origin of the artist, can react back upon and affect that ideology by proposing a counter or an alternative ideology. However, in some cases, the artistic creation can be homologous with the dominant ideology of an epoch.

If, as we have said, literature is a vector of ideology, that ideology is inscribed in a text's matter and manner, in the themes and forms that make up a literary work, for the 'true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms rather than abstracted content of the work itself.' And to this Eagleton adds that in choosing a form, 'the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed. He may combine and transmute forms available to him from a literary tradition, but these forms themselves, as well as his permutations of them are ideologically significant' (*Ibid*:26).

It dawns then that to be able to bring out the ideology of a literary text, one would do well to examine not only its themes and pre-occupations but its formal aspects as well. That is to say, in the spirit of authentic Marxist aesthetics, one should examine the dialectical relationship between

content and form and how these are rooted in the social and general history of the epoch.

What God Has Put Asunder:

This theoretical consideration in the background, we now embark on the practical analysis of the three dramatic texts, beginning with Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder*¹, a play, which at the literal level, is a tale of the unstable marriage between a girl called Weka and a man known as Miche Garba. Their wedding is probationally solemnized by Rev. Unor without the matrimonial rings. The couple will live together and study each other for ten years at the end of which period, if they still desire to be husband and wife, the official ceremonies will be conducted.

However, with time, Weka discovers that Miche Garba is not a worthy husband. He maltreats and neglects her; he takes over and exploits the rich cocoa farms left by her father and squanders the money on his concubines. He does not tolerate the questioning attitude of Weka who is able to stand up to him.

When she can no longer bear Garba, Weka escapes with her children back to her father's compound. Garba pursues her there. Failing to forcefully take her back, he takes the matter to court. The court's verdict is that the couple will continue to live in physical separation though united in a 'simulated wedlock'; that the marriage remains subject to confirmation by husband and wife only, to the exclusion of any other third party; that it will become null and void once any of the two parties objects to it; and that until the confirmation is carried out under the supervision of the court, the couple will continue to live under physical separation.

The main theme emerging from the play is matrimonial incompatibility. The conjugal union between Weka and Garba is, at best, a precarious one and at worst an unworkable relationship. Besides leading an adulterous lifestyle, Garba is neglectful towards Weka and a polygamist whose other wives have been brought up on the principle of total submission to authority without questioning. This lifestyle is inherently abhorrent to Weka whose upbringing in the orphanage has taught her to question things and not just to accept them docilely.

Garba's other wives accept his decisions meekly, willingly going along with whatever he decrees. In this respect Garba is even scared of his new wife because the intelligent and critical Weka is influencing these women to dare to stand up to him. His general philosophy and philandering lifestyle remain insurmountable hurdles in the way of genuine domestic happiness as far as Weka is concerned.

A related theme is economic exploitation. Garba seems to have married Weka more out of economic consideration than out of real affection. He derives a great deal of profit from the coca farms but does not plough back any of it to develop the farms, nor does he use it to attend to Weka's physical and aesthetic needs.

At another level of economic exploitation, we find Garba and his closest collaborators feeding fat on the assets of the co-operative society, the wealth of the nation. He is the unconscionable General Manager of the co-operative society, from whose account he draws huge sums of money to support his sensual lifestyle with beautiful women in luxury hotels. Accountable to no one but himself, he is afraid of no auditors, all such being practically in his palm and can only investigate what he dictates to them.

Beyond the literal level, *What God Has Put Asunder* is a national allegory whose conjugal metaphor, within the Cameroonian context, relates to the uneasy political union between the Anglophone Cameroon and the Francophone part. Hence Weka (West Kamerun) stands for the English-speaking former Southern Cameroons, while Miche Garba (Ahmadou Ahidjo) represents the French-speaking La République du Cameroun. Broadly, Garba's neglectful and exploitative attitude towards Weka signifies the negligent attitude of the Francophone leadership towards the minority Anglophones in present-day Cameroon, an indifferent comportment that has come to represent a central grievance in what Anglophone Cameroonians have identified as the Anglophone Problem.

The allegorical Garba becomes the dreaded dictator, President Ahidjo, who dominated Cameroon politics, the authoritarian bourgeois who tolerated no dissent from whoever. His rule over Cameroon, like Garba's absolute control over his submissive wives (Francophones) was a one-man show; he ruled by decree, encountering little or no opposition at all.

The lavish party Garba throws to his wives in order to bamboozle them to opt for one indivisible family becomes the so-called 'Peace Revolution' of 1972. After skillfully manipulating the population of the Federal Republic of Cameroon, the crafty Ahidjo successfully got all Cameroonians to vote by 99.9% in favour of a unitary state rather than a federation, whereas only Anglophones had participated in the plebiscite of 1961 that led to reunification with the Francophones. Under normal constitutional practices, only Anglophones would have taken part in the 1972 referendum. Ahidjo had known in advance

that with the majority Francophones taking part in the consultation, the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

From the many references made in the play to separate physical habitation, it is clear that Weka (Anglophones) shows a preference for a federalist cohabitation, for within a federation Anglophones would be sure of more development of their region than under a unitary state. The scrapping of the federation by Ahidjo in 1972 has become the major source of what today is known as the Anglophone Problem, the totality of the Anglophone grievances against their Francophone counterparts, summed up in one word: 'Marginalization', despite the fact that much of the national wealth comes from their region.

In 1993 at an All-Anglophone Conference held in Buea with over 5.000 Anglophones in attendance, the Anglophones crystallized their grievances against the Francophones and enshrined them in the now famous 'Buea Declaration', part of which reads as follows:

Our natural resources have been ruthlessly exploited without any benefit accruing to our territory or to its people. The development of our territory has been negligible and confined to areas that directly or indirectly benefit Francophones. Through manoeuvres and manipulations, we have been reduced from partners of equal status in the Union to the status of a subjugated people.

The common values, vision, and goals which we share as a people and those of our Francophone partners in the Union are different, and clearly cannot blend within the framework of a Unitary State such as was imposed on us in 1972...

The so-called 'Peace Revolution' of 1972 was a ploy by Francophones to use their overwhelming majority to alter the basis of reunification for which Anglophones, and Anglophones ONLY, had voted.

(The Buea Declaration 2nd and 3rd April 1993, 9 – 10, 12 – 13).

Even in the early 1990s, during the government-organized constitutional debate going on then, the Anglophones submitted a federal draft constitution that would guarantee their minority interests and ensure rapid economic, social and cultural development, and equitable distribution of the natural resources and, hence social justice. This was in contrast to the official government stand that privileged a unitary draft constitution.

The critical attitude shown by Weka as opposed to the acquiescent nature of Garba's other wives symbolizes the questioning spirit of Anglophones, in contrast to Francophone more deferential attitude to presidential authority. This indicates a fundamental philosophical difference in the world visions of the two major linguistic communities in Cameroon, an irreconcilable dissimilarity well-captured by Professor Godfrey Tangwa (1998:76):

Generally, the most telling difference ... between *anglos* [Anglophones] and *frogs* [Francophones] has to do with their respective attitudes towards *authority*. For the latter, a person in authority can never be wrong. Recall that francophones were not bothered by the clause in Owona's proposed constitution which states that the President of the Republic cannot be held

responsible for any of his actions. For Anglophones, by contrast, a person in authority, while being respected, is always keenly watched with ultra critical eyes and immediately and loudly denounced for any lapses.

These differing attitudes between anglophones and francophones are directly reflected in their respective attitudes to fundamental human rights and freedoms. Francophones take arbitrary curtailment of their freedoms, state terrorism and wanton abuse of human rights as rather in the normal order of things. But these things are what have traumatized Anglophones in the past three decades, to the extent that, today, the vast majority of them would rather risk mass suicide than suffer a continuance of this state of affairs.

These unbridgeable differences between Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon, poetically captured by the title of Ngome's text, seem to be rooted in their respective colonial legacies. Professor Tangwa says he had been baffled by some aspects of the Francophone judicial system with regard to authority until he read the following from a book about the French by two British authors, Thatcher and Scot: ' "Under the French law of 1881 it is an offence to insult the President of the Republic ... In Britain we consider it a corner-stone of our democracy to be able to insult anyone we wish." (*Ibid*) 'Should we substitute "francophones" and "Anglophones" in the right slots', concludes Tangwa, 'the above passage remains true in our own context'. (*Ibid*)

From these literal and allegorical levels, it is clear that Ngome's play exposes the social mentality, the dominant ideology of the world from which it springs, the

historically relative structure of perception that underpins the power of the class represented by the dictatorial, domineering Ahidjo. All evidence therefore points to the fact that the kind of ideology incarnated by Garba (Ahidjo) can best be described as authoritarianism, a political ideology which, in the words of Andrew Heywood, is 'a belief that a strong central authority, imposed from above, is either desirable or necessary and, therefore, demands unquestioning obedience' (Heywood: 328). Everything around the allegorical Garba seems to hinge on authoritarianism, which tends towards assimilating resisting elements for the purpose of enforcing compliance and eventually stultifying and stifling criticism of any kind.

But Ngome's text is far from constructing a simple, passive reflection of the dominant ideology of the epoch of Ahidjo. It also challenges the very ideology. The critical attitude with which Weka is endowed, backed by her demands, her pre-occupations and her preferences as revealed by the multiple references to separate physical habitation, amounts to an interrogation of the dominant ideology of her time. The nature of the ideology espoused by Weka, at the symbolic level, can be qualified as federalism, defined by Heywood as 'A territorial distribution of power based on the sharing of sovereignty between central (usually national) bodies and periphery ones' (Heywood: 331).

A genuine Marxist analysis of a text has to reach beyond at its ideological content as related to class struggle. There is the aesthetic dimension as well. The formal elements of literature are the words that make up the language in which that literature is written so that whatever ideology a text embodies is subtly inscribed in the words, techniques, and content of the text. Eagleton puts it this

way: 'The languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality' (Eagleton 1976:27).

Similarly, the devices or techniques deployed by Ngome, such as the contrast between Weka's censorious attitude and the compliant spirit of Garba's other wives, the dramatic conflict between Weka and Garba, which is the main conflict of the text, the manner in which that dramatic encounter is crafted to be resolved at the end for Weka to have an edge over Garba, the particular character traits that define Garba and Weka as distinctive human beings – all of these devices are ideologically resonant. They foreground the various characters and issues of the text; and as the characters come across to us through their roles, speeches and actions, or how they are perceived by other characters, we can discern their tone of voice, and 'perceive' or 'see' their moral as well as ideological orientation.

In like manner, the language Ngome's characters employ is ideologically significant. For instance, when Garba proverbially declares that 'a cow can only browse within the reach of its tether' (23), or that 'a mistletoe only dies with the tree if it did not propagate its seeds to other trees' (24), he is voicing codified ways of interpreting reality. His proverbs can only be translated to mean that he is a smart bourgeois who wants to exploit his advantageous social position and keep things as they are for his own economic benefit, an attitude of mind in harmony with reactionary authoritarianism. When he says of Weka that 'she is a bloody terror in that Goddamn house... Now she is teaching all my other wives to question whatever I do,' or when he asks his wives: 'We shall continue to be one, indivisible and happy

family, shan't we?' (52), his conservative, authoritarian view of the world, as well as his great fear of a counter vision of life becomes only too evident.

Equally ideologically saturated are the words used by Weka and the court. When Weka complains of Garba that 'he forced me to settle in with him ... [and] had been forcing my children to learn his own mother tongue and to forget mine with which they grew up; I must abide by the customs of his clan, not mine' (53), the divergent cultural as well as ideological interests of the two parties become obvious: Garba's is assimilationist authoritarianism as Weka's is an attempt to keep intact her cultural identity, since she would prefer that they 'live on as before – that is under separate roofs' (53). Weka's federalist disposition is one boosted by the final decision of the court which states that 'the couple shall continue to live in physical separation under the same condition provided for in the probation by the solemnization act' (58).

From the point of view of textual ideology, *What God Has Put Asunder* is not limited to authoritarianism and federalism. It can equally be explained from yet another ideological perspective ... that of racial Manicheanism, epitomized by Rev Gordon and Sister Sabeth, the authorities of the orphanage where Weka grew up (Southern Cameroons as a trusteeship under British administration). Ngome's text reflects, from the perspective of Gordon and Sister Sabeth, the construction of the Self and the Other. These European representatives of Empire set out to orientalise or 'africanize' Weka and the rest of the 'natives'. They view the world through the veil of racial hierarchy: Theirs is a superior race. Whatever is good and civilized is European, while the evil, the primitive, is African.

In their view, a girl in Europe can marry through love, but in Africa she has to be coerced to marry against her will:

Weka: You told me that before, Sister Sabeth. But didn't you also tell me that back in your native England a girl only marries the man she loves?

Sabeth: Yes, but that's in England

Gordon: Listen, Weka, it took us centuries to establish all those civilities, and this is a totally different setting. This is Africa, for God's sake (7).

This composite reading of the text may look like an undue *mélange* of literary criticism with politics and economics. It is not. A Marxist response to such criticism is that a full understanding of a literary text must take into consideration these aspects and even more; and that unless it does so, relating them to the base/superstructure model of society, it is not truly Marxist.

On the other hand a 'vulgar' Marxist view of Ngome's work might be that it is determined by the socio-historical conditions prevailing in the era of President Ahmadou Ahidjo. That is, of course, true, but it amounts to saying that the text is a simple reflection of those conditions. However, such an approach fails to take into account many other factors that mediate the text and the mode of production in the epoch of Ahidjo.

In contrast to a 'vulgar' Marxist method, a genuine Marxist approach, in addition to all that we have analysed will consider the social position, including the social group origin, of Epie Ngome. The fact that he is an Anglophone

and so of the minority group, that he is one of the finest products of the Anglo-saxon educational system, that he has written four other plays, that he is a journalist holding high positions within the national broadcasting system, that his academic career took him to several foreign universities in quest of higher degrees – these are elements worthy of consideration. They certainly influenced the type of play he came to write and the language he used.

Written in a critical realist mode, *What God Has Put Asunder* is structured in the manner of traditional drama, reminiscent of Shakespearean plays which were more or less the staple literary food of post-colonial students at the secondary and university levels, at times even in some senior primary schools. But because of the culture of fear and silence that marked the Ahidjo fear in Cameroon, Ngome could not afford to call a spade a spade, hence the allegorical form in which the drama is cast to protect himself from possible police harassment. For instance, according to the author, when this play was first broadcast in the early 1980s, 'My friends were prompt and unanimous in advising against a repeat broadcast – for my own safety, they said' (*Prefatory note iii*).

Some of the aims of journalism are to inform, educate and entertain. And Ngome's text, though definitely not a piece of journalism, draws on some of the goals of his profession: information, education and entertainment. The text embodies all of these, for it is a play that pleases while it teaches. The informational and instructional dimension has to do with the content that we have sufficiently discussed. The entertainment angle relates to the high dialogue value of the play, the wit and humour that exude from some of the characters, especially Weka and Emeka.

With regard to Emeka, two texts that Ngome appears to interrogate most are a popular Nigerian serial drama that took Anglophone Cameroon by storm in the 1980s, and Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals*, a play that was popular with the G.C.E. Advanced Level Literature students in the 1970s. Emeka's queer and amusing use of language reminds us of Chief Zebrudaya's English in the Nigerian soap-opera, on the one hand, and Mrs. Malaprop's malapropism in *The Rivals*, on the other, intertextual echoes that indicate a positive influence on Ngome.

The marital metaphor that allows for two levels of meaning, the literal and the symbolic, is an ingenious theatrical device employed by the playwright. Young Cameroonians without a sound knowledge of the political history of their country, together with non-Cameroonians may grasp only the literal level and yet be sufficiently satisfied with it: an exciting play on matrimonial problems and the related issues highlighted earlier; the witty repartee between Weka and Rev Gordon, and the malapropism of Emeka will still make for a great deal of humour and interest. Interesting characters like Garba, Emeka and Weka remain so with or without their allegorical garb.

However, the greater pleasure is reserved for the adult readers or audiences able to effect the necessary mental shift from the literal to the symbolic level of interpretation. And there is constant mental stimulation and titillation whenever a reader or member of the audience makes a political or historical linkage between a literal character or incident and a historical one.

As already hinted above, the play's dialogues have a high conversational value, the work of a stylist and a brilliant conversationalist versed in the art of talking, a dramatic

attribute of great merit. It has the advantage of holding and sustaining the interest of both the readers and audiences.

A Marxist justification for the overall artistic force of *What God Has Put Asunder* is that to write well is more than just a matter of possessing a good style. It is equally because Victor Epie Ngome has at his disposal ideological perspectives that can penetrate to the realities of his characters' experiences in various situations. Above all, his historical situation as a sensitive Anglophone allows him access to certain intuitions.

After everything, then, the relationship between the base and the superstructure is not a simple, symmetrical one. *What God Has Put Asunder* is not tied in a one-to-one way with the mode of production. There is a complex, indirect relation between the text and the ideological world it inhabits. Such a relation emerges from the text's form and content. In other words, the social and historical forces, together with the whole lot of factors examined already, have been mediated, through the agency of form, to arrive at the conjuncture of the elements we know as *What God Has Put Asunder*.

Beasts of no Nation:

If, as we have seen, Ngome's text is a national allegory, an extended metaphor as it were, based on the ideological world under former President Ahidjo, Bate Besong's *Beasts of no Nation*², is 'a metaphor of national decay' (131) inspired by the ideological realities under the New Deal Regime. The raw material that Bate Besong, like many imaginative writers, works on is basically ideological. But he creatively transforms it, giving it a definite artistic shape and form. As Cliff Slaughter (200) puts it, the artistic

work 'constructs a mystification or particular way of obscuring the truth about its historical conditions of production.' This way, the completed dramatic artifact, as art, is less purely ideological than say economic and political theory, and thus differs from the original elements that gave it birth.

There is a sense in which the artistic piece can be said to 'distance' itself from the ideological world whence it springs. Yet, it can make us 'see', 'perceive' or 'feel' in imaginary ways, the nature of the ideology of that world. The text's themes and pre-occupations as well as its styles, form and other mediating factors achieve this.

Before we come to examine the textual ideology in detail, however, the dramatic situation in *Beasts of no Nation*, is this: On the one hand we have night-soil-men (NSM), the doomed carriers of mountains of fetid waste of Ednouay City Council asking for their freedom and professional cards; on the other, there is the Mayor of Ednouay Municipal Council, Aadingingin, refusing to grant them these rights, complaining, instead, that the municipal administrators are faced with a huge economic crisis in their hands and working within an austere budgetary allocation, coupled with the rigorous demands of the Structural Adjustment Programme (S.A.P).

The themes and issues emerging from *Beasts of no Nation* are economic, political, cultural and social. Ednouay is a city economically ruined by the bourgeoisie, the ruling class led by Supreme Maximum Mayor, Comrade Dealsham Aadingingin. The strict demands of the S.A.P., together with the wasteful flamboyance of the big directors is taking its toll on the citizens, especially the night-soil-men. City Council money is shamelessly and recklessly pillaged, led by the mayor and his close collaborators, many of whom

put up fabulous storey buildings and ride expensive, status-symbol cars like Jaguars, Italian Pajeros and Ferraris, and Mercedes 500.

The playwright pictures the municipal administrators not only as big looters but as big 'money eaters.' Money is seen as something edible, as food which is consumed and then passed out as waste matter – shit. And there is a great amount of this in the city. That is why Ednouay is considered the most expensive dung-heap in Africa. This accounts for why most of the Council's budget is reserved for the clearing up of waste, a colossal sum of 450 million out of 500 million set aside just for toilet tissues and disinfectants, leaving the other city projects the laughable, paltry sum of 50 million. Thus Ednouay City Council rulers are brazen, unconscionable embezzlers who not only spirit away the council's money into European banks, but are not ashamed to hide some of it in the ceilings of their homes.

In this regard, we bring in here an interpretation of the play by a Francophone government functionary who watched it when it premièred in Yaoundé. B.S. Biatcha's letter in French is addressed to the Chancellor of the University of Yaoundé, followed by our English translation is given after this original:

... L'auteur soutient que les Francophones au pouvoir sont responsables de la crise économique parce qu'ils entretiennent la gabegie et les détournements des fonds. Parmi les francophones (frogs), un accent particulier est mis sur les Beti, amis et frères du Président Biya, qui sont plus responsables de l'état actuel au Cameroun.

L'auteur affirme également, et ceci est la philosophie principale de la pièce, que 'les Anglophones au Cameroun, sont marginalisés et confinés dans les rôles indignes comme celui de 'ramasseurs' d'excréments.' Ils n'ont aucun statut propre et sont même dépourvus de toute carte d'identité professionnelle qu'ils réclament sans succès. Pour Monsieur Bessong (sic), l'Anglophone au Cameroun est considéré comme un traître et un esclave...

(Our Translation)

... The author propounds the thesis that Francophones in power are responsible for the economic crisis because they are producers of waste and embezzlers of public funds. Among the Francophones (frogs), special emphasis is placed on the Betis, friends and brothers of President Biya, who are more responsible for the present state of Cameroon.

The author equally affirms, and this is the central thesis of the play, that the Anglophones of Cameroon are marginalized and confined to undignified roles like that of 'carriers of excrement.' They have no real status and do not even have any professional identity cards, which they are asking for in vain. According to Mr. Besong, the Anglophone in Cameroon is considered a traitor and a slave...

(qtd in Ambanasom 2003: 110 – 111; 113 – 114).

While Bate Besong and Epie Ngome are closer in ideological orientation, they come from two different dramatic conventions. An aspect of technique common to their two works, however, is the use of metaphor; the authors call one thing in terms of another. Yet, while Ngome's text is an extended metaphor with the full status of an allegory, Besong's is allegorical only in a general sense, for the latter's dramatic style is distinctly different. A maverick and an avant garde, Besong is a playwright in a class all alone.

In contemporary Anglophone Cameroonian imagination and consciousness the word 'frog', a pejorative term used several times in Besong's play, stands for the Francophone. It connotes an irresponsible consumer of what others labour to produce, a thriftless, exploitative and even unpatriotic person. In the play the economy is generally under the control of the 'frogs', particularly the Supreme Maximum Mayor of Ednouay Council, Comrade Dealsham Aadingingin with his close bourgeois collaborators – 'the frater-mafia of greed, grab and graft' (118). Note the emotionally laden and, therefore ideologically charged nouns in the quoted portion of the above phrase, especially the last three.

According to the author 'Ednouay is a fictional city' (82). However, if one spells 'Ednouay' from right to left, one has the political capital of Cameroon, Yaoundé. It is important to note that although the drama pulsates on every page with the Cameroonian spirit, the word 'Cameroon' itself does not feature anywhere in the text. The reversed 'Ednouay' becomes a metonymy, representing the whole of Cameroon, for in the words of Augustin Simo Bobda ([1994]:116), 'This term [metonymy] is closely related to metaphor; [it] consists in designating something

by using the name of something associated with it.' Ednouay is also a synecdoche for Cameroon.

This technique is also indirectly at work in one word in the high-sounding name of the mayor of Ednouay – 'Dealsham.' If one splits this word into two, one has 'Deal' and 'sham', a noun and an adjective. If, however, we make the adjective qualify the noun, we have 'sham deal,' a cynical, pejorative epithet with a poetic ring to it that rings a bell to many Cameroonians. Besong's recourse to this technique and his evident insistence on the fictionality of 'Ednouay' might be an attempt to disguise his fundamental political criticism of the incumbency. The ineffectuality of his effort to camouflage his intention is underscored by his arrest and detention by the authorities immediately after this fiery play was premièred in Yaoundé in 1991, a fact confirmed by the following Press release signed by the Cameroonian novelist, Mbella Sonne Dipoko:

Following the news that Bate Besong, playwright, poet, critic, and teacher, has been arrested and detained, friends, writers, students, sympathizers, lawyers etc have formed today, Saturday 25, [May] 1991, a COMMITTEE FOR THE RELEASE OF BATE BESONG.

As a first step, a letter has been sent to the Government calling for his immediate release³.

Another derogatory word featuring many times in *Beasts of no Nation* is 'Anglos,' which stands for Anglophones. It connotes slaves, traitors, enemies, renegades or the lowest of the social heap, indeed, the dregs of humanity. Anglos are the 'Night-soil-men' who by extension, can 'also represent the workers without whom society will come to a standstill' (Abety 255).

In vain Anglos ask for their freedom and also their identity cards. Aadingingin tells them to attach to their application form, the impossible fee of one million francs each, but which amount the third NSM intimates 'will immediately be embezzled' (113). These demands are issues of great symbolic significance. For they stand for Anglophone basic demands including their cultural identity. Without them the Anglophones run the risk of being assimilated into the greater Francophone culture. The stiff resistance put up against these demands by the bourgeoisie or the 'frater-mafia' in authority in the play speaks volumes for what was happening in the 1990s in the Cameroonian society with regard to pressure groups like Cameroon Anglophone Movement, (CAM), All Anglophone Conference, (AAC), Teachers' Association of Cameroon (TAC), General Certificate of Education Board (G.C.E.B), and the drawn-out war of nerves between TAC and the government over the G.C.E. Board issue, all of which are symbols of Anglophone identity and culture.

When all has been said and done, the dominant ideology emerging from this text is bourgeois ideology, a term, in Heywood's words, 'denoting ideas and theories that serve the interests of the bourgeoisie by disguising the contradictions of a capitalist society' (Heywood 328). The bourgeois ideology or capitalism is incarnated by the man with the overblown, suggestive name of the Supreme Maximum Mayor of Ednouay City, Comrade Dealsham Aadingingin and his close collaborators the 'frater-mafia of greed, grab and graft.' They constitute the bourgeoisie, the ruling class and the top brass of the government department. Their privileged positions give them access to millions or billions to toy with.

This national bourgeoisie is made up of big directors of lucrative organizations and co-operations like SONARA, CELLUCAM, and AMACAM; from their midst emerge real estate developers who put up fabulous chains of storey buildings, which they then let out to the government; some of them dominate the transportation industry with a fleet of luxurious buses. Should they be ill from gorging themselves with rich food and expensive wines, extraordinary medical care is given them; were they to die, they would be put in their golden caskets and interred in diamond-studded graves.

Owners of the means of production, these bourgeois or capitalists,' according to Narrator, are the 'beasts of no nation... and sensuous class who, some day will take the Ednouay nation hostage as a result of their inexhaustible greed' (131). Thanks to their insatiable appetite for money, 'corruption is the national industry in Ednouay' (135). They get richer because the producers of their wealth, the workers, get poorer. To perpetuate and protect their interest, the bourgeois increasingly become cocooned in self-interested delusion. They must tell lies to the proletariat to conceal the fact of the latter's oppression and exploitation.

When the bourgeois ideology is confronted by radicalism mounted by the night-soil-men, the bourgeois attempt to appease the NSM by ascribing their economic woes to 'the rigours of the present crisis' (139). Otshama says, 'the crisis has spared no one' (135). In any case, any attempt by the bourgeois to rationalize the economic misery of the proletariat is contradicted by the flamboyant lifestyle of the bourgeois themselves.

Although the radicalism that challenges the bourgeois ideology is out for fundamental change in favour of the night-soil-men, it is not inscribed in any classic Marxist

terms. In other words, apart from advocating liberty and freedom as well as professional identity cards, the radicalism, beyond these demands, is not yet well-defined. But it is there, evident in the purposefully provocative and disgusting behaviour of the NSM with their smelling buckets of human excrement. For instance on page 102 we are told 'The Night-soil-men raise their behinds to the audience and foul the air'! The radicalism is there, inscribed in the emotive language used by some of the characters, especially the NSM as well as in the stage direction provided by the playwright. We quote here only parts of three songs by the NSM in pidgin, and in English. From 'Song of the Prodigal'

- (a) Goat di chop
For place weh
Dey be tie him (100)

....

So my dear frog
Brother wack
And burn
This damnbrubah
Ednouay (100)

- (b) From (The Night-soil-men sing)
All: When you eat money
The way locusts
Eat tonnes of green
When frogs eat money
The way locusts
Eat tonnes of green (102)

(c) Solo: I fit bury
One thousand million
For my ceiling
I fit bury meme
Ten thousand million
For my ceiling (103)

Songs (a) and (b) highlight in strong emotional language and through the images of a goat browsing where it is tethered, and of swarms of locusts consuming tonnes of green vegetation, the issue of 'frogs' in authority capitalizing on their fortunate social positions to plunder the nation's wealth with reckless abandon. Fragment (c) quoted highlights the matter of stealing and hiding, by frogs, even in their ceilings, of huge sums of money.

The language of the play is not ideologically neutral; it is suffused with ideological modes of perception as indicated by the following quotation in pidgin:

Cripple: Monkey will do
The dorthy work
Gorilla go dey wack

First (NSM): O me die man, innocent Anglo
Monkey work gorilla chop?
(106)

Here in 'Monkey work gorilla chop', we have a codified, proverbial way of interpreting reality: the idea of parasitism, of an individual feeding fat on the labour of another, in short, of economic exploitation. The Monkey does the dirty job, but it is the gorilla who reaps the fruit of the monkey's toil. It is obvious who the gorilla is, and

who the monkey; the gorilla is the bourgeois, while the monkey is the worker (the Anglo).

Since the dramatist has 'no voice' in his own work because it is other characters doing the talking, the closest any dramatist comes to voicing an opinion in his own drama is in the stage directions. In the case of Bate Besong's stage directions in *Beasts of no Nation*, sometimes, there is strong and affective and, therefore, radical language employed, the kind that sometimes characterizes Besong the polemicist. For instance, in describing Aadingingin on page 138, Besong deliberately employs insulting, repugnant and repulsive language that makes Aadingingin appear in his most grotesque ugliness, a discourse that spells radicalism by any account and shows his negative attitude towards the man:

Comrade Aadingingin is a lumbering gargoyle of a mayor with a brooding brutishness. He is fat, extremely fat; the sort of bloated fatness associated with a very juicy toad... Comrade Aadingingin, like one of those who eat and drink too much, has developed several ripe fleshy layers, pumpkin-like below the natural skin. (138)

A dramatist at home with the modernist mode of discourse, Besong is a self-conscious playwright determined to break with the past. A militant author with an obvious innovatory dramatic technique, he is continually experimenting and searching for new ways of expression. In all his plays Besong provides an admixture of the realistic, the historical, the tragic, the comic and the grotesque, underlying a particular ideology or ideologies. He brings into his writing, in a recondite manner reminiscent of T.S.

Eliot, his wide learning as well as lived and imaginative experiences.

His fame as a dramatist partly resides in the fact that he is also a published poet with a rare ability to use words to create powerful images and symbols with poetic resonance as he does in *Beasts of no Nation*. The following comment on Besong's poetry is equally generally appropriate for the technique he uses in his dramatic text:

He is never content with simply talking about one thing only, but he must seek parallels, analogies or contrasts here and there, hence the highly allusive nature of his poetry... To read Bate Besong one should be ready for an allusive excursion into history, literature and the Bible. Ambanasom ([2004] 2002: 46).

Beasts of no Nation itself abounds in literary, Biblical and historical allusions. The title of the play – 'Beast[s] of no Nation' is an abusive phrase flung by an angry character at another in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960:138). In Besong's text Narrator uses it alternatively with the modified version 'Thieves of no nation' (90), in direct reference to the destructive, compulsive appetite of the bourgeoisie for money. The Narrator's and the author's strong antipathy towards the bourgeoisie becomes clear.

On his part, Otshama's flattery of Aadingingin: 'Your Excellency is absolutely right. I never thought of that. It is surprising how Your Excellency thinks about everything', is a verbatim utterance from C. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (19) and belongs to Professor Okong flattering the Head of State in that novel. Here Besong uses this allusion to satirize the Ednouayans' (Cameroonians') exaggerated, sycophantic attitude towards the Head of State.

In the play there are general allusions to sickness afflicting a people and the need for a cure. Specifically, there is an allusion to the wickedness and immorality of the people of the Old Testament and the punishment God metes out to them. For instance, when Narrator says:

If I find in Ednouay
Two righteous Directors
Then I will spare
All the place for
Their sake..... (94)

He is alluding to the passage in Genesis 18:24-32 wherein Abraham pleads with God to spare the sinful City of Sodom which is eventually obliterated, anyway. There is also the subtle allusion to Romans 6:23: 'The wages of sin is death.' Besong uses all these allusions to point to the imminent or possible economic destruction of the City of Ednouay by the imprudence of the plundering bourgeoisie. The author uses parody and songs in pidgin to highlight certain themes and issues and to communicate more effectively with the audience.

As already stated, *Beasts of no Nation* is the product of the socio-historical conditions prevailing under the New Deal Regime. Besong, the author, is a University graduate and lecturer in English Literature, and one who has mastered, and been influenced by the drama and poetry of difficult modernist writers like T. S. Eliot and Wole Soyinka. Eternally committed to the Anglophone Cameroon welfare, and himself a victim, in an immediate sense, of the system he flays and whose rulers he flogs, Besong is an angry writer whose diverse experiences and influences he harnesses and transmutes into art. His wide-ranging satire slashes at everything in its path: personalities and institutions in sports, history or politics, etc.

But it may be objected that Besong's modernist dramatic technique, although it reveals a rich and fertile imagination, sometimes engenders obscurantism, owing to inaccessibility of language and style. One can say, in Besong's defence, that his unconventional approach is, as Terry Eagleton says of Brecht, 'quite compatible with the widest uses of fantasy and invention' (Eagleton 1976:72). Besong is using realism in a new way, extending its range. He would probably agree with Brecht that 'our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions... we must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from elsewhere to render reality to men in a form they can master' (qtd in Eagleton 1976:72).

Requiem for the Last Kaiser:

In *Beasts of no Nation*, the bourgeois are confronted by the oppressed, symbolized by the NSM who actively and persistently ask for their rights and, towards the end of the play, even carry the struggle to the dreaded Mayor's office, storming it with their buckets of excrement, a radical act of ideological resonance. But this radicalism that challenges the bourgeois ideology is articulated in non-Marxist terms. However, when we come to Besong's next play, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*⁴, a work conceived from a socialist perspective, the bourgeois are challenged by a more determined radicalism expressed in a spirit that is clearly Marxist as it takes on a socialist coloration. The broad-based, conscientised progressive forces fighting the bourgeoisie now are fully aware of what they want, where they are going, and how to get there.

Requiem for The Last Kaiser consists of three fragments of scene, and two movements. The first fragment opens with a woman educating a student to take part in fighting the repressive forces in Agidigidi, and the second reveals that Atangana, a clergyman, collaborates with the reactionary regime of Akhikrikirii. The flashback in this fragment also reveals Abossollo as the security boss of the regime and therefore, one who controls the instruments of torture. He accuses Woman of subversion and of planning a coup d'état. But Woman says 'ours will be a popular uprising not a coup' (16). Atangana the Pastor cautions her: 'Be careful woman... Don't let the Devil mark you... Trust and obey' (16). In the last fragment we see Akhikrikirii, the head of state, in the company of his foreign friends and supporters: a Western Ambassador and a Swiss Banker, all of whom flatter him.

In the first scene of the first movement we meet the progressive forces, made up of unemployed academics like Akonchong and Gambari, Poet as Mandela, workers, voice of Woman, etc. There is a parody by the academics in which the regime is subtly satirized. The scene ends with Abossollo threatening critics and enemies of the regime. In the second scene of the first movement we meet the progressive forces again, including the leader of the market women, Woman and soldiers. We notice the education of the soldiers by Woman in the interest of the oppressed. There is the play within the play, wherein the academics play the role of head porters, etc. Here the cruel ways and weaknesses of the regime are subtly criticized and exposed. There is the reading of the revolutionary thesis by Akonchong, and then Abossollo arrives in a threatening mood with a gun, but he is disarmed by the people.

In the second and last movement we find the people – the progressive forces: the poet, former infantry men, women, workers, etc., surrounding Akhikrikrii's Marble Palace. There is a general revolt, and Ngongo, the chief praise-singer of the regime, confesses his crime against the people. Worst of all Abossollo too, without the army, abandons Akhikrikrii. But the Ambassador and the Swiss Banker still stick around him. However, deserted by his people, Akhikrikrii commits suicide and the people, the progressive forces, force their way into the Marble Palace.

The central theme of this play is the popular challenge to an authoritarian regime, or a popular uprising against a dictatorship. It is the education of the deprived and their stand against a tyrant. In fact, this theme is already didactically summed up by the author in the play's sub-title 'a drama of conscientisation and revolution'.

Conscientisation implies the education of the masses, especially the oppressed masses, in such a way that they become imbued with a heightened sense of critical consciousness. When oppressed people become conscientised, they tend to know more about certain issues and situations than they did before. They become more familiar with the inner structure of their society and the dynamics of the vicious system that has held them captive. The knowledge of this produces a change in behaviour in such a way as to make them now want to do away with the evil forces that have helped to cripple them. Thus for every vicious action, so to speak, by the oppressors, there is not only an equal and opposite, but, in radical terms, a superior opposite reaction by the oppressed, whose ultimate goal is the improved living condition of the masses.

This trend of reasoning reveals that Bate Besong has been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by

Marxist thought, at least as far as *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* is concerned. In Marxist view, history is primarily determined by economics; the history of any society, excepting primitive communalism, is one of class struggle. Marxism stands strongly opposed to capitalism which it seeks to topple, replacing it with socialism.

To do so, Marxists must first educate the oppressed in the dynamics and nature of capitalism, the economic philosophy that upholds the private ownership of property and the means of production, and encourages individual initiative, spirit of competition and the profit motive or accumulation of wealth. 'Marxism's goal is the liberation of consciousness and freeing of praxis from bondage via revolutionary theory' (Solomon 14). For a real revolution to take place the people's consciousness must be transformed; there must be a change of mentalities. The people must be prepared, educated and ideologically sound. And this pedagogical mission is essentially Bate Besong's intention in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, as implied by the subtitle: a drama of conscientisation and revolution.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser illustrates that literature is not conceived in a vacuum. In it are two distinct ideologies locked in a fierce confrontation. And here, as Rius says, 'ideology expresses and defends the interests of the classes in struggle' (Rius 149). On the one hand, we have an oppressive, exploitative and essentially capitalist or bourgeois way of life represented by Akhikrikrii and his tribal clique, including the Western Ambassador and the Swiss Banker. Agidigidi is a neo-colonial state, and Akhikrikrii, a neo-colonial agent, subjected to easy manipulation by his European neo-colonial masters. The consequence of this neo-colonial stranglehold on the state of Agidigidi is the cruel exploitation and pauperization of

the masses for the benefit of the national bourgeoisie and compradors, and their foreign masters. The latter's survival depends on their keeping things as they are, admitting neither radical changes nor non-conformist tendencies. As a result, their administration is characterized by coercion, threat, imprisonment and torture.

On the other hand, there are the exploited, the oppressed, represented by Woman, Student, Poet, workers, market women, the unemployed academics and former infantrymen. As a group they constitute the progressive forces, working for a change of the status quo. Their approach is basically radical, and their general attitude, socialist. They are out to seize power from the tyrannical minority and give it to the people. This comes through to the audience from the steady education given by Woman to the student and soldiers, in particular, and the sensitization of the masses in general.

Woman and Dr. Akonchong roughly represent theory; the student, soldiers and other workers, the potential for action. The ones represent reflection, the others, praxis. Thus brain and brawn become necessary for a successful revolution.

Iduote, the capital city, is the setting of the play. 'Iduote' is a word constructed in the same manner as 'Ednouay' in *Beasts of no Nation* is. That is, spelled from right to left, Iduote becomes 'Etoudi'; the local name for the presidential palace in Cameroon, under the New Deal Regime. Iduote is thus a synecdoche for Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is a product of its society, having been informed by the social, political and historical conditions of Cameroon under the New Deal Regime. Bate Besong fully subscribes to a central Marxist principle that

literature is socially-conditioned. In his own words '... literature must be inspired by a historical myth-informed consciousness. It must embody in bold relief the specific historical features of the entire Cameroonian reality' (qtd in Ngwane 36). And his literary works are an exemplum of his words. His plays are artistic creations inspired by the Cameroonian experience. They are the transformation into art of social, political, economic, cultural and ideological issues pertinent to the Cameroonian reality.

Making allowances for the playwright's poetic licence and his fertile imagination, all that goes on in the neo-colonial state of Agidigidi is generally true of our present day society. Some of the statements made by the fictional Akhikrikikii like: 'The people understand me very well. I also understand them, Je vous ai compris' (1), belong to his historical counterpart. Even names like Abossollo, Atangana and Ngongo in Cameroon are easily identified with ethnic groups with close affinities to the dominant ruling class. The topicality, currency and, consequently, the sensitivity of Bate Besong's material can be seen from J.S. Biatcha's visceral reaction translated above.

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is a reflection and also reinforcement of the contemporary critical attitude of many Cameroonians who, thanks to a lively private press, are no longer afraid of sticking out their neck for political change. The significance of Besong's dramaturgy in Cameroon, like Bole Butake's, lies in the fact that his plays are an important aspect of the on-going process of political sensitization of Cameroonians in the wake of the wind of change from Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the resurgence of multiparty politics in Africa, particularly since the last decade of the twentieth century. For with the coming of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, there was a loosening up of dictatorial grip on

power by despots of mostly one-party regimes; there was a gradual liberalization of the press and a general goodwill to democratize and open up to multi-party politics.

Yet, in many cases, especially in African countries, the external democratic pressure was not enough to force political rulers to change; internal pressure was also necessary, indeed indispensable, for any significant political change to be registered. For this reason, in Cameroon, political parties were formed and some forcefully launched in the face of stiff government resistance; social pressure groups and local human rights organizations also came into being; committed imaginative writers and outspoken independent individuals emerged. All of these progressive forces, like those in the play, had a common goal: to force the hand of a reluctant government to yield to the wind of change and to open up to a valid democratic process that would allow for the respect for human rights and social justice.

As an Anglophone Cameroonian, Bate Besong writes with the burden of the Anglophone Problem frequently on his mind. In *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* the issue of 'Anglos' being integrated into the larger Francophone society is raised in the parody scene where Gambari asks: 'Anglos what are your grievances against National integration then?'

On his part Akonchong, says: 'We have recruited Frenchmen of sciences to civilize you yet your secessionist brains have rejected all medicines... What is your grievance ... Ph.D. Doctor... Too much English... Too much anglais-Biafré!' (34) In Cameroon the word Biafré or Biafran is a code term for Anglophones, and in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* the unemployed academics, are 'pseudo-Biafrans'. This is made clear to the audience through an aside by Abossollo in the parody scene, with reference to Gambari

and Akonchong, 'Pseudo-Biafrans are excellent in the evil art of mockery!' (36).

Bate Besong draws on both the Anglophone experience and his personal plight; for, as a civil servant, he has been roughly treated by the system. The anger we find in his plays is partly the bitterness inspired by the frustration the man has known, not only as an Anglophone, but as a bruised individual. In Besong's own words: 'The Anglophone Cameroonian Writer must never forget his origins. His writing must depict the conditions of his people, expressing their spontaneous feelings of betrayal, protest and anger' (Besong 1993:18).

As a realistic work *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* reveals a quality valued in Marxist criticism – that of 'the world-historical', the complex relations between man, nature and history. These relations embody and reveal what is most typical about a particular phase of history. What Lukács refers to as typical are the 'Latent forces that in every society are the most significantly historical and progressive and that expose society's inner structure and dynamics' (Eagleton 1976:28). The duty of the realist writer is to flesh out these typical trends and forces in sensuously realized characters and actions.

In *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* are the forces of oppression and exploitation, incarnated by Akhikrikrii and his clique with their neo-colonial masters, on the one hand, and the progressive forces made up of the exploited, on the other. When the oppressors, standing firmly in the way of change, are confronted by the oppressed, bent on routing out the tyrants, then there develops a tense situation likely to explode with serious repercussions. For, as Wole Soyinka says, 'he who makes peaceful change impossible makes violent change inevitable.'

The well-delineated characters of the play are bound to generate actions and reactions likely to produce historically significant social outcomes imbued with the power of 'world-historical', events with the power to create or influence history. To the extent that these forces make things different, especially in favour of the masses, as shown by their forceful and successful occupation of the Marble Palace, its former occupant having committed suicide, they are progressive. The progressive forces, the proletariat and others are quite aware that they are making history; that they are working towards a change, the change of the status quo. 'We want nothing! We have come to hear you die! Only your blood can cleanse this land!' (58)

A key principle in Marxist criticism is commitment of art to the cause of the proletariat, putting art in the service of pressing social issues. In all his writings: his poetry, polemical essays, drama and even in his lifestyle, Bate Besong reveals himself as a man profoundly committed to the welfare of his Cameroonian community in general, and the Anglophone environment in particular. He comes through to the reader as a man whose breast is full of the milk of human kindness, a fierce defender of the rights of the downtrodden. Indeed, he has come to symbolize the Anglophone hope.

All the issues and themes raised in his plays reveal that only a committed artist, a humanist, would be that concerned with the lot of suffering men and women, a suffering inflicted on them, tragically enough, by their own cruel kind with the collaboration of unfeeling neo-colonial masters. Yet, Bate Besong is not misty-eyed in believing that he has a magic wand to solve, instantly, the problems of his suffering people. He himself acknowledges the limitation of the committed writer:

True, the power of the writer is not always strong enough to change the political and social situation of his time but his art can become a fighting literature, he can write works which are artistically profound and politically correct: he can write works of indictment and works that show how his world is and could be. (Besong 1993:18)

The committed artist alone may not have the power to bring about immediate political change. But he and the writers of other forms of political literature, a buoyant private press, the appropriate political opinion leaders and parties, can all effect meaningful change. 'The committed artist need not be a wheel alone, but he is an essential spoke in the wheel of socio-political change.' (Ambanasom 1996:225)

Requiem for the Last Kaiser is socialist in conception but modernist in technique (Matumamboh 1988:iii). The desire on the part of Besong to experiment, to look for more effective dramatic techniques, is still there. But greater emphasis is now on a more effective communication with the audience. Gone are the songs that were a feature in *Beasts of no Nation*. Then, they had served as thematic reinforcement, but now Bate Besong does not need them since he has incorporated his issues into clear statements and dialogues.

There is the flashback technique which is effective in that it throws more light on the character of Abossollo, Atangana and Woman. There is also parody for satirical effect. And the device of a play within the play makes for multiple role-plays, allowing the author to use certain actors to achieve comic and satirical effects otherwise impossible with the real actors without greatly modifying the context.

He employs the Brechtian alienation effect, this way involving the audience in the craft of his work and showing that the characters are actors mimicking, parodying, mocking something other than themselves.

Thus we have Akonchong and Gambari, the unemployed academics, role-playing head-porter, but at other times they are Akhikrikirii and the Ambassador. Still there are times when Akonchong is condemning "Akonchong", his alter ego. The only difficulty likely to arise from such multiple roles is that if members of the audience are less wary to know exactly when a character is playing his central role and when he takes on someone else's, or is parodying somebody, the play will be confusing to them. Equally effective is the technique of using voices rather than the physical presence of the speakers. Voices can, from off stage, threaten Akhikrikirii in language that would be impossible if the speakers were physically near the tyrant.

A profound Marxist understanding of Bate Besong's *Beats of no Nation* and *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* would take into consideration a number of factors like the social group origin of the author, his educational background and aesthetic orientation, the literary influences on him, his authorial ideologies and their relation to literary forms, and the linguistic devices and the techniques employed by the author. All of these elements are relevant to the base/superstructure paradigm. However, there is no simple, direct correspondence between the base and the superstructure, between Besong's works and the real history of his time.

A complex indirect relationship connects these texts and the ideological worlds they inhabit. Therefore, in constructing contrary, radical ideologies to confront the dominant bourgeois ideology, as we have seen, Besong, like Epie Ngome before him, succeeds in transposing,

through the agency of form, the world vision of the progressive social group to which he belongs as well as other historical forces into the highly mediated dramatic pieces we know as *Beasts of no Nation* and *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*.

From the perspective of overall textual ideology, we have seen what can be more or less termed competing ideologies (i.e. a dominant versus a less dominant but opposing ideology) emerging from each of the three texts analysed. In Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder* there is authoritarianism versus federalism; in Bate Besong's *Beasts of no Nation* we have bourgeois ideology confronted by radicalism; and in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* the bourgeois ideology is seriously challenged by a socialist ideology. These rival ideologies are what Emmanuel Ngara (1985) calls the authorial ideologies, whether or not the author is clearly leaning on one ideology or the other. And in the case of all three texts, we have seen that Ngome's and Besong's sympathies are on the side of the oppressed and exploited; that is to say, the authors espouse radical ideologies.

Apart from these central ideologies, there is the 'Aesthetic ideology' which, in E. Ngara's words 'refers to the literary convention and stylistic stances adopted by the writer' (Ngara 108). They can be defined, in literary terms, as romanticism, symbolism, expressionism, realism, formalism, socialist realism, modernism, etc. To go by this definition, the aesthetic ideologies coming out of the three texts are as follows: from *What God Has Put Asunder*, there is critical realism; from *Beasts of no Nation* we have modernism; and from *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, we have a mélange of socialist realism and modernism.

End Notes

* This chapter is a slightly retouched version of Chapter Six of my *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* (2012:114).

1. Victor Epie Ngome, *What God Has Put Asunder*. Yaoundé: Pitcher Books Ltd. 1982. Page references to this play are taken from this edition.
2. Bate Besong, *Three Plays*. Yaoundé: Editions CLE. 2003. Page references to *Beasts of no Nation* are taken from this edition of *Three Plays* (2003).
3. See 'Press Release!!!' dated May 25, 1991 and signed by Mbella S. Dipoko: Place of the 'Release' is not indicated.
4. Bate Besong, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*. Limbe: Presbook, 1998. Page references to the play are taken from this edition.

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CHAPTER SIX*



ALTERNATIVE IDEOLOGICAL VISIONS

The Cameroonian creative writers of English expression have adopted an imperial language, English, and the novelistic art form to serve the Cameroonian vision. They are exploring, dramatizing and exposing the mores, and critiquing the social ills that plague the Cameroonian/African society. The world of these novels is an imagined real world, peopled with characters who criss-cross one another's path, full-blooded characters caught up in the complex web of their quotidian existence, involving their dilemmas, hopes and frustrations. Through their utterances, thoughts and feelings, these characters express themselves, and in the process, reveal their outlook. They articulate their views about certain issues or individuals in their communities or their world. In handling their subject matter the Anglophone Cameroonian novelists, in general, and those treated in this section, in particular, artistically, guide and shape our attitudes towards their virtual characters, subtly persuading us to adopt the writers' point of view or ideological stand. In other words, Tah Asongwed, Francis Nyamnjoh, John

N. Nkengasong and Alobwed'Epie, the novelists under discussion in this chapter, imaginatively explore counter ideologies to subvert the prevailing hegemonies for possible alternative dispensations and for a meaningful social deconstruction of Cameroon.

Born to Rule (1993)

***Autobiography of a Life President by Tah
Asongwed***

The sub-title of this work – *Autobiography of a Life President* – suggests that it is the story of an actual person written by himself. The reader therefore automatically and mentally places the text within the rubric of actuality. However, this impression is quickly dispelled as soon as he reads, on the page following the title-page, the following disclaimer by Tān Asongwed: 'The names, characters, places and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Accordingly, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely one of incredible coincidence.'

The conclusion the reader draws is that the book is a fictional autobiography, and that the putative author and life President, Wan Nei, is purely the creation of Tah Asongwed's imagination. This follows suit for the purported author of the foreword, or, for that matter, any other character in the text. This preliminary clarification is essential in that we can then situate the work squarely in the context of imaginative literature – fictional autobiography, a genre with an honourable pedigree in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), purportedly written by Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon and then a Captain of several ships (Abrams 906). So, through Wan Nei, we find Tah Asongwed role-playing or simulating real-life situations; and given his

incredible achievement in the text, this is a feat that is not given to just any writer.

That said, *Born to Rule* (1993)¹ is set in a fictional African country, Mandzah, and the self-narration of an African President – Monarch, Wan Nei. In it he tells us how he rose from a humble beginning to be a life president. A bastard who does not even know his own mother, Wan Nei is brought up by white European missionaries in colonial Mandzah. After a secondary school education, Nei decides to join the trade unionism advocating improved economic conditions for the native Mandzah workers, a movement whose needs will eventually end in the demands for political independence,

However, unlike the radical anti-white natives clamouring for political independence, Nei finds himself among the moderates, i.e. the pro-white indigenes who feel they are not yet mature for political independence. Nei's moderate faction of native workers is understandably privileged by the white colonialists who begin to lure Nei with gifts and money, grooming him for a future leadership role in the country. They bring tremendous pressure to bear on him; white missionaries are sent to bribe him with a great deal of money to help in his political campaigns. With the white establishment – the missionaries and the colonial administration - on his side, Wan Nei easily becomes the President of a newly independent Mandzah, this, after the radical opposition has been put in disarray and its leadership decapitated, more or less, thanks to the efforts of Rev Grimm.

With their man in power, the white establishment and the West in general take virtual control of the economy of Mandzah. Nei surrounds himself with his family, friends and relatives. Appointment to key political positions is done

along tribal lines; in some cases, Nei plays off leaders of one tribe against the other. After literally mortgaging the country to foreign powers, he and his cronies concentrate the wealth of the nation in their hands. Indeed, Nei stashes away his loot in his 'personal national bank account' abroad (147). His administration is characterized by dictatorship, intolerance, ruthlessness, kleptocracy, mendacity, equandermania and megalomania. Nei has made his country 'self-sufficient' in cheap, imported, call it, discarded rice, from the West. In this and other ways Western countries get wealthier at the expense of Mandzah at the receiving end of unwanted Western products.

The central theme emerging from the text is the narrative of underdevelopment of Africa through autocratic rule. Wan Nei emblemizes those African dictators who, with the connivance of the West, have installed themselves in power. Cocooned by their cronies, families and friends, and solidly supported by Western, bloated capitalists, they have virtually ruined their countries economically for their own selfish aims and those of their foreign masters. As in Alobwed' Epie's *The Death Certificate*, here is organized plunder. This then is the grand, immoral theme whence many subsidiary negative ones emerge.

The burden of taxation, for example, is borne by the poor and unprotected masses – those least able to pay; the rich and the powerful, those most capable of paying taxes, are exonerated. Wan Nei the head of state has no qualms declaring that 'The big guns are not paying the state a farthing ... The result is that taxes are paid by the wretched of our earth who do not have the money to pay.' (153) No vice is beyond Wan Nei. Beginning with his family, then his relatives and ministers, unsavory practices like nepotism, tribalism, favouritism and corruption are

cultivated; these vices then spread out, like a cancer out of control, and overrun the country.

A bastard and a man who has grown from rags to riches and power, Wan Nei can be better understood thanks to the insights of that branch of psychology founded by Alfred Adler (1870-1937). The latter holds that the search for power, and not sexual drives, is the single important factor that determines how an individual thinks, feels or behaves (Rosner 135). Wan Nei is thus ruled over by one dominant passion: the crave for power and dominance over people. Besides, as an obscure bastard, Nei carries within him an emotional hurt or injury. According to Adler a man like Wan Nei, because of his unenviable family background, harbours feelings of inferiority complex. But 'out of these feelings comes the need to feel superior to those around' him (Rosner 135). Thus Nei is driven by the desire to prove to those around him that, for all his disgraceful social origin, he is, indeed, somebody; he is, therefore, propelled to excel in the political arena to compensate for his emotional hurt and social handicap; he is psychologically pushed to excel in politics to prove, at least to himself, that he is actually superior to those who surround him. Nei has, consequently, erased his emotional deficit to attain that rare position of life president of Mandzah.

Intimating above that *Born to Rule* had a respectable ancestry in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, was an oblique reference to it as a satire:

A literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity. True satirists are conscious of the frailty of institutions of human devising and attempt through laughter

not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling (Holman 398).

Born to Rule is a political satire, and Asongwed's subject matter is political rule in African countries. He handles it critically, humorously and wittily with the intention of inspiring a change for the better. True, the author does not speak in his own voice, having created the putative narrator, Nei, who is telling his own story. By this device, Asongwed maintains an aesthetic distance, and a feel of objectivity.

In the work there is humour and wit, as well as hard criticism of some individuals, institutions, organizations and countries. The satire is wide-ranging and corrosive, scalding just about anyone or anything it runs over. Few are spared; not even the so-called African revolutionaries who are often gagged and silenced by the lure of lucre. In a section of his book on political regimes in Cameroon, Cardinal Christian Tumi (2006) regrets the easy co-optation, by the autocratic regime in power at the time, of one of the most vocal members of their 'Christian Study Group' in the following words:

Shortly after our meeting with the governor of the Northwest Province, a member of our group, Mr. Solomon Nfor Gwei, was appointed a government minister. It would seem that was Ahidjo's own way of silencing someone who was critical of his regime. From then on, one of our members, who had been a bitter critic of the regime, considerably modified his language. I felt disappointed by his behaviour once he became a member of government. But, I tried to understand him. Perhaps if I had been a father of a family like him, faced with such an

opportunity to considerably improve my financial situation, I might have reacted in a similar manner (32).

Through Wan Nei's narration, the author hits hard on the current breed of African heads of state and their Western collaborators, particularly the US and France, who develop their societies at the expense of African fragile economies. Through the discourse of the putative author of the foreword to the text, Tah Asongwed condemns the hypocritical attitude of the so-called developed world and their weapons of mass destruction witnessed during tribal wars in the third world, wars fuelled and romanticized on Western T.V. (28); through Wan Nei's narrative Asongwed flays lazy African university lecturers who are best but at lechery, alcoholism and rev reviews of publications by incumbency (113-114); and thanks to the peculiar discourse of Nei, Asongwed flagellates those who claim to be in the opposition but are very easily silenced by the power of Mammon (184).

Born to Rule is a text divided into 21 chapters, some with sub-headings. The first five chapters are, respectively, 'Early Childhood', 'Education', 'Initiation into Politics', 'Party Leadership', and 'Party Convention and my Investiture'. The rest of the chapters include, inter alia, topics like From Pluralism to Single Party, Appointments in Government, Ministers, Ambassadors, Policies in Key Sectors, Economic Planning, Tourism, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs, Culture, Public Works, Sports, Debt Problem, Internal Security, Taxation, Plots, etc.

Although a fictional autobiography, the text is a useful handbook to politicians, especially aspiring heads of state. However, while it is a good reference document with regard to the organization of the business of government,

it is not an ideal blueprint on how to run a government, and this because of its essentially satirical nature. Indeed, its merit as a political text rests on the reverse, i.e. on how not to run a government, for it is Asongwed's intention to flay African autocrats who ruin their countries because of bad governance.

Like other Anglophone Cameroonian satirists, Asongwed is ridiculing and flagellating those in authority with the moral intention of making them change their bad habits for the better. His severe criticism of public officers is an indirect advocacy of good governance, of economic and political transparency in the management of public affairs. Asongwed's ideal society would be one characterized by moral decency, one wherein economic and political abuse would be absent, a society where there is social justice and fairness in the distribution of the wealth of the nation, and not one in which this sharing is skewed in favour of the rich and the powerful, nor in favour of an ethnic group. Asongwed's good society would be one devoid of electoral chicanery (223), corruption, nepotism gerrymandering and favouritism. Ultimately, like Bate Besong, Asongwed is, by implication, advocating authentic rigour and moralization in the management of 'La chose publique' (Ambanasom *Education* 146).

As a scathing political text, *Born to Rule*, to a great extent, depends for its satirical effects, on Wan Nei's uninhibited discourse. The language with which Asongwed invests the text's putative author and narrator is the key to the work's effectiveness as satire; for under normal circumstances one would hardly find an African, or for that matter, any head of state, talking uninhibitedly and with gusto about his disgraceful rule, in the manner Nei is doing. The kinds of outrageous revelations coming out of his

mouth can occur only when, for example, a Christian is confessing exclusively to a priest, or when an individual is mentally talking to himself, or when one is dreaming. This is because when one's skewed inner thoughts are made public, they would certainly not be something of which one would be proud. On the contrary, one's negative secret thoughts, if disclosed, would evoke in one shame and unease. No individual with a sense of self-pride and dignity would like to make his selfish inner thoughts the object of public scrutiny.

Only in the context of satire would startling disclosures such as those made by Nei be seen for their ultimate fictional intent. A great deal of the humour, wit and criticism is thus couched in Nei's peculiar discourse. Asongwed constructs Wan Nei's character to fit his satirical scheme. He can make Nei, through his language, behaviour and reasoning, stupid, clever, cruel or contradictory. Sometimes Nei talks with his tongue in his cheek; at times he is embarrassingly frank and down to earth; at other times he is simply fantastic. However, since Nei is generally portrayed as a brutal dictator ruled over by the dominant emotions of selfishness, greed, and the crave for power, there is little to endear this corrupt and ruthless politician to the general reader. Most of his outstanding attributes are negative ones.

Wan Nei has no illusions about the enticements of wealth and power, especially early in his political career, when he was pressurized, through the agency of the Rev Jerry Dogood and the colonial Governor, to become a political leader: 'I started to marvel at the power of power ... The sheer splendour of what I saw tantalized my fancy' (55). He is frank in acknowledging 'the pressures to which I was subjected to accept the leadership of my people'

(56). Then obviously talking with his tongue in his cheek Nei says: People say politics is a dirty game. I say politics is not dirty; people are dirty. *Proof is that I have been in this business now for over fifty years and have neither soiled my hands nor dirtied my name* (156) (my italics). Another instance where Nei's talking calls forth tongue-in-cheek humour is when he creates the 'Ashawo [Prostitute] Committee' to attempt to regulate the way in which 'prostitutes sleep with their partners. 'One avenue we are exploring will lead to our allowing the prostitutes to charge customers according to the style and posture adopted during the act' (97). The man's incredible sense of lewd humour is further evident in that memorable, paradoxical episode wherein some of the prostitutes of Mandzah come out, stark naked, demonstrating publicly, accusing the government of 'prying into their private parts' (97-98).

In one and the same breath Nei can overstate and understate his case in a situation with ironic and humorous effect that enhances readability:

Rumours have been spread by our enemies worldwide that, in quelling the student demonstration that took place four years ago, my soldiers shot indiscriminately at poor defenceless students. I say that is hogwash. The press, which claims to be so knowledgeable about everything should have done its homework. In the first place, it was a battle between two opposing forces. *The students were armed to the teeth with slogans, petitions and fiery speeches while my soldiers only had armoured cars, tanks, guns, truncheons, tear gas and long drawn out penises to defend*

themselves against the blighted fury of the massive student crowd (182). (My italics)

Equally full of ironic humour is the following statement couched in equivocation: 'Our soldiers are *excellent marksmen* although General Bandeh Tandeh tried unsuccessfully to assassinate me last year. *He was executed for being a sloppy marksman*' (182). (My italics)

Nei has no qualms confessing to the kinds of economic measures which he implemented to ruin his own country to the economic advantage of a few wealthy people among the ruling elite. 'We will be self-sufficient in imported rice since we will have enough rice on the market' (102). He waves aside campaigns by the dissident majority poor and says: 'They are jealous that imported rice is giving a lot of us in government a lot of money, and that if we do the same thing to the other foodstuffs, we would be billionaires while they are left out of the feast' (103).

On the one hand, with no sense of shame, Nei openly declares that he is nepotic and tribalistic, that 'most of the key civil servants in Mandzah come from my ethnic group and that they have a divine right to lead our civil service' (148). This amounts to repressive tribalism as ideology. On the other, he boldly admits to mortgaging his country to foreign powers and boasts that it is impossible for any coup d'état to take place in Mandzah without the blessing of these external countries. 'Anyone who thinks he can stage a coup against me and succeed must connive with them because a coup that doesn't have their blessing will not succeed. But since I have made them shareholders and stakeholders in our country – against our people's will – they know that if I am overthrown, they stand to lose all the opportunities I have given them in my country' (149).

A head of state who institutionalizes bribery and is proud of encouraging and perpetuating it must be a rare type, the kind constructed only in a satirical work. Nei insists that he would like to 're-state quite categorically that it is not the intention of my government to abolish bribery which we all know is an inexhaustible source of supplementary income to members of the cabinet, our people in uniform and civil servants' (150). Scandalously, he goes on to add that 'our roads are paved with evil intentions and littered with corpses of victims of road accidents. Government is doing everything possible to ensure that the roads are maintained in a permanent state of disrepair, and that road users pay increasingly more bribes' (151).

We intimated above that Nei is a man with a sense of humour; his language at times can be a touch too bawdy for the liking of some as, when, while strenuously trying to refute allegations of sexual promiscuity, he only succeeds in confirming them:

Do not mind the press that always unearths from the fertile recess of its own imagination falsehoods about my having girl friends strewn all over the country. I debunk all these accusations in lavish detail later on. *Breathes there a man with penis so dead that he has never lusted after a woman?* (40)

(My italics).

Nei can be a philandering husband, choosing any of his female ministers to go to bed with. But should the woman become too generous with other men, the head of state becomes peeved, nasty and insulting, as he does to Florence Nyanga [Show-off], an illiterate prostitute he had appointed Minister of Social Welfare:

It was in the last position that Nyanga betrayed me, the party and her country. She took her position too seriously and misunderstood what social welfare means. She started throwing her body into every Tom, Dick and Harry, especially to every dick [penis]... (121).

A fair amount of the humour in *Born to Rule* equally resides in the names of the characters, some of them either in pidgin, or in the local Baforchu language, or in English. There is Mr. Jiga Karangwa (61) both of which words are in pidgin, meaning respectively, Jigger and Louse or, imagistically, a nuisance, one who causes trouble to others. No wonder, Mr. Jiga Karangwa is the leader of the radical political party, Mandzah Independence Party (MIP), that advocated political independence against the wishes of the colonial administration. A threat and a nuisance, Mr. Jiga Karangwa had to be frustrated by the administration in favour of the moderate Mandzah Peoples Union (MAPU) led by Wan Nei. Then we have Mr. Shidong (sit down) (49), leader of the Mandzah Workers Union (MAWU) who, as his name implies, goes around the country, inciting workers to observe a nation-wide (sit-down) strike in protest against the government for owing them 'a few months in back pay' (49).

For our example from the Baforchu language, we have a name with a strong, negative connotation, General Mbin Shwiih (167), meaning General Elephantiasis-of-the Scrotum. Very popular among his military colleagues, General Mbin Shwiih is the only man likely to pose a real threat to Wan Nei's ambition to be President for life. To avoid this, Nei offers a juicy diplomatic post abroad to General Mbin Shwiih, far away from home. Obviously the insulting name translates Wan Nei's secret wish that the

charismatic general were afflicted with such a crippling disease.

A few names have an English ring to them with obvious meaning. There is Rev Grimm (59) with his grim, diabolical plans to discredit the opposition for alleging that he had been having some hanky panky relationships with the female members of his church. Finally, we have Rev Jerry Dogood (51-53) who, in the colonial days, was sent with gifts and enticements to persuade Wan Nei to become the leader of his country on behalf of the white establishment. From Wan Nei's point of view, Rev Jerry Dogood did a great deal of good to enable him (Nei) to become president for life in Mandzah. Through the construction of these reverend gentlemen, Tah Asongwed is communicating an important fact: both Rev Grimm and Rev Jerry Dogood symbolize the significant, negative role played by the church as it worked alongside the colonial administration in grooming some of Africa's corrupt and brutal dictators. Here Asongwed's text carries out a bitter critique of organised religion (Christianity).

Given the manner in which Asongwed constructs his central subject, the type of language he endows him with, the frank manner in which the character is made to speak, occasionally raising allegations by his political opponents and detractors and then demolishing them; given the way Nei is made to be upfront about his relationship with his Western supporters and collaborators in their organized pillage of the wealth of Mandzah; in view of the way Nei is made to talk shamelessly, without qualms, about his public and private life as if he were making a true confession to a priest; yes, given the idiom Asongwed puts into the mouth of even Dr. George Stanley Peter Jr, the putative author of the foreword to *Born to Rule*, one can safely conclude that

the author's ultimate intention is to provoke a reaction, on the part of the African readers, which response will lead to a possible alternative political dispensation with regard to the contemporary political situation in some African countries.

If the welfare of the greatest majority is of primordial importance in any political dispensation, then Wan Nei is a classic example of a neo-patrimonialist and of how not to be a head of state. His conservative ideology disregards basic democratic principles, and will not tolerate any change in the status quo. From his perspective the prevailing hegemony must reign supreme, and that is why he is president for life. *Born to Rule*, thus, constructs the dominant ideology of the epochs of some African grubby dictators in the 20th century. But the text equally challenges the very reactionary ideology. This is done through the construction of the counter, radical ideology upheld by people like Mr. Jiga Karangwa, the opposition political leader, the radical trade unionist, Mr. Shidong, and the other revolutionaries opposed to Wan Nei in general. From the negative representation of Nei, people of goodwill opposed to his autocratic style of governance will likely jump unto the bandwagon of radicalism that challenges his authoritarianism; and we are talking here of the majority of the oppressed and deprived citizens of Mandzah as well as the sensitive African readers in general, a radical Marxist idea. Tah Asongwed's text therefore has a Marxist agenda.

Mind Searching

Although the bulk of the Anglophone Cameroonian novelists, like their African counterparts, have produced literary works in the critical, realist mode, Francis Nyamnjoh stands out from the lot by virtue of the distinctive, modernist temper of two of his novels. Modernism, according to

Webster's Third New International Dictionary, is the 'philosophy and practices of modern arts: esp: a self-conscious and deliberate break with the past and a search for new forms of expression in any of the arts' (1452). With regard to literature modernism is a 20th century movement and the aesthetic ideology characteristic of the work of such writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Samuel Beckett and T.S. Eliot, to cite but these few. As a mode of writing, modernism is marked by a distinctive imagination and a clear, deliberate and strong break with traditional forms and techniques of expression. It is a collection of characteristics although not all of them are exhibited by any single writer considered as modernist.

Modernist writers reject traditional values and assumptions, spurn realism and naturalism, and pre-occupy themselves less with the social human being (Holman, 274). In contrast they hail the individual and the inner being, dwelling much more on the interior reality and introspection in their depiction of the inner states of the human mind. Thanks to advances in the field of human psychology, one of which is the theory that the significant existence of human beings resides not in the outside world but in the mental-emotional processes, some modernist writers have come to use what is now known as the stream-of-consciousness technique: the attempt to reproduce the totality of the raw awareness of the human mind as it actually exists. It is now a psychological truth that were one to make a precise inventory of what goes on in the individual's mind at any given moment, one would discover that the totality of the raw awareness (stream of consciousness) consists of a constant flow of a jumble of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations and reflections. Therefore, if one is to describe the true content of the human mind at any

time, then those disconnected, illogical elements must be expressed in a stream of ideas, images and words comparable to the unordered flow of the mind.

Favouring this unordered actuality revealed by the stream-of-consciousness technique which they believe brings them closer to life, modernist writers reject chronology and orderliness. In an instructive essay entitled 'Modern Fiction', Virginia Woolf, one of the modernist writers, says 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness' (qtd. in Schorer 7). In the same article Mrs. Woolf also makes the point that John Galsworthy, H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett are materialistic novelists, pre-occupied with the outward trappings of life instead of with the flickering essence of life itself. She adds:

In contrast with those whom we have called materialists Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards with complete courage whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability or coherence or any other of these sign posts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see (*Ibid*).

Part of what Virginia Woolf finds commendable in James Joyce is, to some extent, evident in Francis Nyamnjoh's *Mind Searching* (1991)², a modernist novel whose author has thrown overboard much that is commonly

considered indispensable to the novel, whether its method be dramatic or descriptive: description of places and people, explanation of environment, a plot of external action pitting two or more opposed forces, arousing dramatic scenes, climaxes and conclusions. With *Mind Searching* we do not have that guide-traveller relation between author and readers, the conventional author who is a calm observer, commenting, explaining and linking up gaps.

Divided into five parts the book's content is narrated as it appears in the mind of the main character, using the stream-of-consciousness technique; for, as its title suggests, the novel is the exploration of the mental landscape of the central character, Yanda. It consists of long narrated passages with tiny morsels of dialogues; and the narrator's colloquial, anecdotal tone is well-captured by the author. This is what Judascious Fanda Yanda says of his narrative technique:

Were I to put my thoughts down on paper just the way they have occurred to me so far, and were I to attempt to have them published, I'm pretty sure they might make no sense to readers who are used to having stories presented in an orderly way with clearly defined themes, sophisticated plots, and consistent styles ... if ever I decide to become a writer, I would have to write the way I think, even if this means writing only for myself, as would most likely be the case (47).

Therefore, whoever is looking for a well-told story with a clearly designed plot, chronological events and well-developed themes and fully fledged characters, will not find any in this 'modern' novel. The characters, pale and vague, are mostly ciphers, simply known as Dr. T., Mrs S.,

Professor N., and Hon V.M. We do not hear them in conversation, nor see them in action. Most are merely mentioned by the narrator.

While Yanda's narrative method quoted above may have some value because it is life-like and because it takes us closer to the mind of the protagonist and is thus psychologically defensible, it certainly has its drawbacks. For instance, it ignores the fact that some of our thoughts are more significant than others. And the stream-of-consciousness technique seldom gives emphasis to our more important mental processes. Indeed Yanda himself soon realizes this when, on page 133, his more important mental processes are supplanted by less significant ones:

It's strange how crowded my thoughts are! I can't think of a thing without thinking of another! What a mental curse!.. didn't I start by blaming the Honourable V.M. for criticizing me over much? Then why did I abandon that train of thought? Why did I delve in Dr. B's article? Was it timely and appropriate or was it forced? That I can't say, but I fear I have a defective mind! Concentration is what I badly need. For truly a man is no good who cannot concentrate (133).

Of course it is life-like for our thoughts to flow in disorder, but when necessary, we can intentionally concentrate on more important ones. It is realistic for our thoughts to flow in a chaotic way, but it is the duty of the artist to bring, out of the formlessness and chaos of life, order and beauty. But within the context of the aesthetic ideology of modernism which deliberately seeks to break from traditional ways of doing things, fragmentation and the seeming chaos of life it depicts is in order. When Fanda Yanda comments on his narrative technique above, the

reader becomes aware of the foregrounding of the element of 'narcissism,' the tendency towards self-reflexivity wherein the text, (*Mind Searching*) focuses on its own end and processes, a characteristic of modernism/postmodernism (Barry 91).

Yanda's justification for his mind-searching rather than an open-approach to socio-political issues is that the Cameroon at the time of his story is not yet a society of freedom of expression. Vocal critics of the system are picked up and incarcerated, so he is wise enough not to be foolhardy: 'That is why I have chosen to keep my mind-searching exercise an internal mental process for as long as it is safe for me. Not until I'm sure and certain that the country is free and democratic enough. That the people have a right to information, and that the authorities are ready to let Truth substitute Rumour, not until then, will I vent my thoughts on paper' (26-27).

In his mind searching he enjoys limitless freedom with countless thoughts tumbling over one another for prominence. Often in church Yanda wanders away from the sermon time and again, comes back to it, only to stray off once more. The stream-of-consciousness technique which the author uses here lays bare the raw content of Yanda's mind consisting of all odds and ends, encompassing anecdotes, gossip, hearsay, rumour, facts, memories reflections, events, etc. This enables the narrator to pass in review all of the unenviable things happening in the Cameroonian society. At times he secretly reads a critical letter cut out from a radical magazine, an article censorious of African heads of state, or a fiery correspondence between a friend in Africa and his penpal in Europe.

The ills of the Cameroonian society exposed through Yanda's naïve and insouciant approach to issues include

bribery and corruption, perpetuation of mediocrity, prostitution, superstition, hypocrisy, governmental squandermania, and forgery. However, Yanda does not criticize the system with the intention of proposing a better moral alternative. He simply exposes it for what it is and himself benefits from its venality. For he is helped and given a job by Hon V.M. as private secretary; he is admitted into the university even without the entry qualification requirement; and, because of his influence in the public service and connection with the Hon. V.M. Yanda, unrelated to the Minister by either kinship or ethnicity, is now known to belong to the same tribe with him, a corrupt development that makes him the logical, 'legitimate' heir to the Hon. V.M. The latter 'has stayed in the government for a long enough time to nominate whom he would like to succeed him. It is strange how God does his things! ... Who could have imagined three years back that the Honourable V.M. would choose me of all to succeed him?' (158)

Once secure with a good job, Yanda hypocritically becomes a staunch defender of the system he had raised questions about. Henceforth he will not tolerate vocal critics of the government. Rather he would like radical sociologists to be concerned only with harmless research projects 'with no biting criticism of those in power or of the system in place' (155).

The dominant textual ideology here is therefore conservatism which has as its broad agenda the desire to conserve things as they are. Conservatism resists change, especially radical or fundamental change. Conservatives do not allow freedom of expression lest it ushers in vocal criticism of the political system. A conservative political system often resorts to punitive, repressive instruments to keep political opponents and critics silent.

But against this dominant discourse the author constructs a counter ideology, radicalism, essentially harboured in Yanda. However, for reasons of his own safety as just pointed out above, Yanda does not voice it out. Therefore Yanda's internal (mental) counter ideology is buried in him. Outwardly, Yanda's behaviour shows that he complies with the prevailing conservatism. That is why he derives enormous benefits from the power structure in place. Consequently, Yanda embodies both radicalism and conservatism. In other words, in *Mind Searching*, for tactical reasons, Yanda's ideological stance is, on the one hand, radical vis-à-vis the prevailing conservatism, and, on the other hand, homologous with the very conservatism, a classic example of what, in Marxist criticism, is known as conflicted ideologies. This is similar to the historical change of heart by an erstwhile critic of the Ahidjo regime already quoted above (Tumi 32).

Francis Nyamnjoh would seem to be saying, through the rise to prominence of mediocre Yanda, that this is how the system comes by its ministers, in the main, immoral and mediocre elements. It does not matter that they are Christians. Indeed, the insistence on Yanda's regular church attendance is to point out the moral irrelevance of the church in the face of the pervasive malpractice going on in the society. Christians commit all types of immorality without any qualms. Yanda may be a regular church-goer, but the church's moral teachings do not seem to have gone through him. The novelist is saying: this is how a morally mediocre system perpetuates itself. The conservative ideology Yanda indirectly attempts to fight and criticize ends up co-opting him. Therefore, at the end of the novel, the conservative political system, essentially the legacy of President Ahidjo's

reign marked by a great deal of fear and secret incarceration of political opponents, remains intact.

The Disillusioned African

But it is in *The Disillusioned African* (1995)³ that Francis Nyamnjoh constructs a radical ideology to confront a prevailing hegemony. Set in Cameroon in the early 1990s in the context of contemporary world politics, and against the background of the wind of change that had blown from Eastern Europe in the 1980s, Francis Nyamnjoh's second novel is purportedly written during an imaginary visit to the United Kingdom by the Cameroonian hero-philosopher and putative author, Charles Keba. A philosopher by his own admission, Charles has gone to Britain 'to amass authority in philosophy' (5). He is understandably very pre-occupied with philosophical reflections, or in his own words, 'Philomeditations'. It is while in Britain to study philosophy that he writes four long letters to his friend back home in Cameroon, Franglotus Moungo. But the fifth letter is the one written to the readers by Franglotus Moungo.

In his first letter (Part One of the text), as he arrives in Britain and is yet to gather his first impressions about this 'Queendom' and send back home, Charles turns his critical gaze first, on the condition of his home continent, Africa, milked forever like a cow by its leaders under the supervision of bloated, Western capitalists. We are talking of the Africa that has had political but not economic independence, the Africa wherein the white masked dancers have withdrawn to the background and are replaced by their shadows, the black pawns, ushering in the 'dance of the puppets'. Dominated by their greed, the latter plunder their state funds and stash away in foreign banks, while making empty promises to their citizens and the outside

world. Callous and unconscionable tyrants, these so-called leaders are the economic destroyers of Africa.

In his second epistle Charles turns his satirical eye on peculiar British habits some of which include 'the weather', that eternal favourite topic of conversation, the taciturnity of the English people on trains, little church going in the U.K., the excessive materialism of the British people, the commercialization of the female body on T.V., the homelessness of English people in their own land, and white superstition like the great fear of passing under a ladder, or the dread of Friday the 13th. Charles is struck by the paradoxical habits of whites tanning themselves black and blacks bleaching themselves white.

In his third letter Charles engages in merciless self-criticism: that he has come but to Britain to study African philosophy in vain, a situation that makes him not quite different from some of those he has castigated. Ashamed of himself, Charles shifts his criticism onto those Africans who claim to be more European than the Europeans themselves, especially the transplanted 'Eton of the Bush', the Kamuzu Academy that does not 'answer to the need of the country' (101). He then takes a severe look at cross-cultural experiences and negative stereotypical European views of Africans. Charles ends the letter with the fantastic memo by the Belgian Minister of the Colonies to missionaries going to the Belgian Congo ('Zaire') in 1920. This is the country Charles now wants to visit for its pioneering role in the development of African philosophy. Some scandalous imperial Belgian principles given out to the Missionaries are: 'Teach your pupils to believe and not to reason ... Consider all blacks as little children whom you must continue to deceive and manipulate even long after independence ...

Teach them a doctrine whose precepts you yourselves will not put into practice, etc' (117-119).

Then in his fourth and last letter Charles criticizes the whites, especially the French who rationalize monopartism in tropical Africa while encouraging democratic pluralism in Eastern Europe, a policy that, in Africa, gives rise to dictatorial excesses, and misrule, upholding French economic and cultural hegemony. There is an attack on chicken-hearted Cameroonians who hardly reason beyond their stomachs. The letter ends with a review of the collapse of dictatorial communist regimes in Eastern Europe, especially the popular uprising against 'the Butchers of Bucharest,' Mr and Mrs Ceausescu, and its effect on the balance of power between the key world ideologies of Capitalism and Communism, the West and the East.

The final Part Five of the novel consists of the only letter written by Franglotus Mounjo to the readers, explaining what has since happened to Charles Keba when he left the UK for Zaire and eventually to his village in Menchum, Cameroon. Now bereft of his hands, one lost in a shoot-out at Kinshasa Airport, and the other at the launching of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party in Bamenda, Charles Keba is back to his rural Menchum community to revolutionize the peasant masses with his subversive ideas. The rural folk are now said to be speaking out courageously, openly asking questions that embarrass the rich and the powerful. Charles is teaching them to convert their sweat and toil into economic and political power in the hope of eventually combating and rooting out the current so-called elitist model of democracy, freedom, justice and power. When the peasant masses will have been so successfully conscientized, the elitist model of governance 'shall have met its Waterloo' (149).

The title of this work constitutes its apt theme: the disillusionment of Charles Keba. Charles' disillusionment is in several senses. He is disillusioned with himself for going to study African philosophy in the UK where there is no university with a department for that specialization; disillusioned with his experience in the Hospital for Tropical Diseases where he nearly died of a raging malarial bout while British medical doctors carried out forever their slow and annoying tests; disillusioned with the paradoxical attitude of the French, the fountainhead of 'Liberté, Fraternité et Égalité,' who rationalize monopartism in tropical Africa while encouraging multipartism in Eastern Europe; disenchanted with the inability of the African people to overthrow their dictators in the way Ceausescu and his consort were ousted in Eastern Europe; disappointed with the so-called African democratic ruling elite falsifying election results in their favour to remain in power; and disillusioned with the opposition parties that make no provision for decision-making with regard to illiterate peasant masses, nor do they fight genuine corruption.

For all his disillusionment, Charles is more sympathetic and tolerant towards the suffering African masses. While he is more positive towards Africans caught up within the sites of cross-cultural encounters, he is definitely critical of African rulers and their impoverishing leadership; he is more critical of Africans ashamed of their African origins or African apers who claim to be more English or French than these Europeans, but know next to nothing about their own culture. Charles is more condemnatory of American or European anthropologists with their stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about Africans; and more censorious of the hegemonic attitude of some Western powers, especially the French, eager to hold sway over

certain parts of Africa. According to Charles, it would be better for Africans if competing European hegemonies were to operate in their societies than if there were only one dominant power, 'lest one good custom should corrupt the world,' to quote Alfred Lord Tennyson (Abrams 1971).

Consequent on this disillusionment is a related theme: the role of the intellectual in society. *The Disillusioned African* is a novel of ideas, and the most central idea, and one of its major themes, is the place of the genuine intellectual in emerging democratic African societies. Francis Nyamnjoh, in an artistic manner, i.e. through the letters of Charles and Mounjo, explores and articulates the role of the African genuine intellectual in societies where politics is still marked by the hegemony of the so-called democratic ruling elite who have virtually hijacked the wealth produced by the indigent masses. Though a minority, the political elite, through corruption and organized pillage, control the economic resources of their societies.

If Charles' imaginary sojourn and trajectory from Cameroon to Britain and back, his movement from high, critical intellectualism and then down to earth, is anything to go by, then what Nyamnjoh is saying is that the genuine African intellectual should go beyond being a mere egg-head; he must move from the high ivory tower of mere ideas to the hard realities on the ground. He must become altruistic by taking an active part in ameliorating the living condition of his people. And this will be best done through the sensitization, conscientization or education of the socially deprived, or the dregs of humanity, to become aware of their own socio-political potential. Once these people are politically conscious, they will initiate meaningful change in their society leading to an improvement of their human condition.

As one follows Charles' sweeping critical intelligence from the first to the fourth letter, encompassing

Cameroonian, African, British, European, and indeed, world socio-cultural and economic issues, one cannot but acknowledge that here, indeed, is an intellectual with highly developed critical powers. Charles is really in his element talking about contemporary world socio-political issues, but what bothers him most is the human condition of the African struggling masses. The more one delves into Charles' critical discourse, the more one is reminded of Bernard Fonlon's model of 'the genuine intellectual' as spelt out in his book *The Genuine Intellectual* (1978).

Incidentally in *The Disillusioned African* (103) Nyamnjoh echoes Fonlon, while on page 95 of the same text, he quotes Fonlon. Besides, Louise Cuming's citation in her foreword to *The Disillusioned African* (iii) with regard to the intellectuals' role in politics is from Fonlon's *To Every African Freshman..* (90), or *The Genuine Intellectual* (137). These intertextual echoes would seem to point to the fact that Nyamnjoh's central character, Charles Keba, the Philosopher, was probably conceived with Fonlon's model in mind.

Fonlon's genuine intellectual is one with a university-level education, specialized in a subject area; he possesses a scientific-philosophic spirit that makes him question, doubt, and criticize things deeply rather than just accepting them facilely. He is one who is fearless, courageous and ever seeking after truth and knowledge. But, according to Fonlon, the intellectual is not just trained for his own sake to be admired and worshipped as if he were 'a golden calf in the wilderness of ignorance and mediocrity' (*Genuine Intellectual* 129). The genuine intellectual is trained so that he can be of service to his immediate and wider human community. In Fonlon's words the genuine intellectuals are people with 'a deep, keen and lofty sense of dedication to the service of the commonwealth, immediate community

of which they are members, and thereby, to the service of the world as a whole, of humanity at large' (129). Fonlon's accent is thus on the altruism of the genuine intellectual. In his third letter to Mounjo, Charles, echoing Fonlon says: May the Almighty God bless and replenish the efforts of the Genuine African Intellectual. Remember that the criterion by which one qualifies as a Genuine Intellectual isn't Western Education, but selflessness in the service to the general public. Without being sufficiently altruistic, a Professor, Doctor in the Western sense of these words, is of no relevance to Africa today (103).

The sensitive reader who follows Charles' searching, critical thought from Part One to Part Four of the novel and carefully reads Mounjo's letter (Part Five) to the readers noting what it says about Charles, will certainly realize that Charles has moved from the heights of high intellectualism and criticism to the local realism of his rural Menchum community. The university-level intellectual has logically put his scientific and philosophical knowledge, as advocated by Fonlon, to the service of his immediate community and humanity as a whole. Charles has 'decided to conduct the fight from the only angle he believed true change was possible' (149): from among the rural peasants of his Menchum locality, specifically 'the resettled but forgotten victims of the 1986 Lake Nyos Disaster' (*Ibid*).

The didactic significance of such a humanitarian act for anyone who aspires to the status of a genuine intellectual is thus obvious and best summed up by the concluding portion of Mounjo's letter to the readers, many of whom may consider themselves as intellectuals:

So he (Charles) teaches the peasants how to make political and economic capital out of their sweat and toil, and out of the ignorance and lazy habits of their urban-centred overlords. And it is for these reasons, dear readers, that I broke my promise to a friend at heart. I thought Charles had something to share with more than just a friend. It is my hope and wish that some of you might be inspired to work along similar lines, and that one day the situation will be well and truly better for the downtrodden and the forgotten bulk of our Darkened Continent (150).

As already intimated above, in writing this novel Nyamnjoh employs, from the point of view of technique, the epistolary device; for *The Disillusioned African* is constructed in five parts, each an epistle, a long sprawling letter. The first four letters are written by the major putative author, Charles Keba, and the last (fifth) letter, shedding some light on Charles' activity, is by Moungo. *The Disillusioned African* is a unique epistolary novel. If one comes to the text expecting to find a swift flowing narrative with a chronological plot and well developed characters, one will be disappointed. If, as the overall shape of the work indicates, one looks forward to reading reasonably short letters from one character to another with an immediate reply to them, one will equally be disappointed.

On the contrary, what we find in the text are one-way epistles addressed to a friend who does not reply to them in a conventional form; we read rather long, very long academic, or at times, philosophical letters, constructed in a manner peculiar to the speculative essayist. Indeed, the more one peruses the epistles, the more one feels that

they are essays punctuated with the appropriate colloquial, anecdotal, informal tone of the letter or speculative essay.

Like the essay, Nyamnjoh's text privileges ideas, facts and information over characters and plot. In his letters Charles adopts the stream-of-consciousness technique spelt out on page 47 of the previous novel, *Mind Searching* (1991), wherein there is no chronology in the narration. His ideas often flow following the way thoughts flow in his mind, in a disorderly fashion. Essentially, then, like the earlier text, *The Disillusioned African* is a modernist novel, and as such, cannot conveniently fit into the matrix of the conventional, traditional novel.

To be sure, it does possess elements found in the traditional novel; but it equally possesses a great deal that we do not usually associate with the conventional. *The Disillusioned African* is a satirical, political novel that gives preference to ideas over fictional form. The author's intention is to instruct and persuade the readers to view things the way he sees them, in his radical manner. The text is constructed in a discourse that espouses visionary radicalism in favour of the oppressed and exploited masses of Africa, particularly the voiceless, illiterate peasants. Nyamnjoh, through his mouthpiece Charles Keba, debunks and exposes sham, pretence and hypocrisy wherever they may be found – whether in Africa or in Europe. But his heart goes out more to the African proletariat chafing under the yoke of their so-called leaders and their foreign capitalist collaborators.

Now, after all of Charles' philosophical reflections and criticism, it dawns on him that his fundamental mission is, ultimately, that of grassroots education, that his great service to his immediate community and humanity as a whole is to spend the rest of his time educating the peasant masses

in his locality so that when they will have been sufficiently conscientised to stand up to face the Western-educated elite fearlessly, then the oppressors will have met 'their Waterloo' (149). We have here a historical image, an allusion to the battle of Waterloo in 1815 which saw the final defeat of Napoleon by the British and allied forces under Duke Wellington, near the Belgian village of Waterloo. Just as Duke Wellington made history by defeating the almighty and seemingly invincible emperor, so does Nyamnjoh expect the radicalized peasant masses to make history when they eventually confront the political oppressors and dictators to usher in a new political era, a classic realization of a Marxist principle. Nyamnjoh's text therefore has a Marxist agenda.

Across the Mongolo

If, in the educational sense, Charles Keba represents the hope of the deprived peasants of rural Menchum, in the same sense, it can be said that Ngwe, the central character in J. N. Nkengasong's *Across the Mongolo*, is the symbol of Anglophone hope in the Federal Republic of Kamangola. Set in Cameroon around the mid-sixties and the seventies, *Across the Mongolo* (2004)⁴ is a novel that highlights Anglophone subalternity within the Francophone hegemony in the bilingual Federal Republic of Kamangola. Because of the insurmountable obstacles he faces, Ngwe fails to obtain an academic degree at Besaadi University and emerges at the end of the story virtually bleeding from physical torture; however, he also comes out of his traumatic experiences wiser, with enough political education to become leader of the Young Anglophone Movement, an act of educational significance.

After a sound secondary school education in the Anglophone state of Kama, Ngwe Nkemassah proceeds to the Francophone state of Ngola in the bilingual Federal Republic of Kamangola to acquire university education in Besaadi, the only university in Kamangola. But it is in Besaadi, within the hegemonic influence of the French language, that Ngwe meets his academic Waterloo. (Ambanasom Review *Across the Mongolo* ⁴)

To better appreciate what is happening in *Across the Mongolo*, the reader should bear in mind the socio-historical context in which the text was constructed. History has it that since 1961, the year of the union between the former French and British Cameroons, the effects of European colonial history, English and French bilingualism became a national policy in the republic of Cameroon. At the turn of the 21st century the Anglophone Cameroonians number at least 5 million out of a total population of about 17 million Cameroonians, constituting thus a linguistic and cultural minority.

In the text the friction between the majority Francophones and the minority Anglophones is therefore one constructed by the realities of the larger social context and based essentially on the psychology of numbers. It is a battle of complexes, more or less, wherein, impelled by their numerical strength, to go by Ngwe's narration and reasoning, Francophones feel that they should colonise and assimilate the Anglophones, that the dominant Francophone culture should lord it over the Anglo-Saxon culture. The narrator sees this relationship in terms of master/slave binary opposition, with the Anglophone assigned the subaltern status of the inferior Other (65, 108, 163, 164).

This explains the hegemonic influence of French, particularly in the University of Besaadi where major courses

are dispensed, and all examinations written, in French in a country that calls itself the bilingual Federal Republic of Kamangola. This would equally account for the hostility mounted against the Anglophone wherever he attempts to speak in English, whether it is in the District Officer's (D.O's) office, or in one of the university offices, or, above all, in this university lecture hall, of all places! (64-65).

One discerns in this attitude the Francophone imperial text that sets out to rewrite itself in the Anglophone inferior Other. But there is a big gulf between the 'pure text' and 'performance'; when pushed to the limit to express himself in French in an office, Ngwe blurts out only what can be termed barbarism committed on the French language: 'Je suis dit que' (61), literally translating the English 'I'm saying that'. This, of course, subverts the Francophone colonial 'text' that has produced an intolerable 'performance'. That is why the scandalized Francophone Ngwe is addressing urges him to go ahead with his English that had been shushed out of him, in the first place. 'Non, non, non. Continuez en Anglais' (61).

Until he comes into contact with Francophones, Ngwe's school life is generally smooth and uneventful as he passes through Wysdom College and College of Arts. Things begin to turn sour when he crosses the Mongolo (the Mungo), the Great River, that physical and symbolic point of demarcation between the Anglophone State of Kama, and the Francophone State of Ngola, which two federated states form the bilingual Federal Republic of Kamangola. The brutality that characterizes the Francophones in general starts right from the boundary between the two states.

Here Anglophones coming into contact with Francophones for the first time are humiliated and physically assaulted by gendarmes on control who ask for particulars

like 'impôts' and 'pièces', or command an elderly Anglophone passenger to sit on the ground, 'Assois-toi' (40). Before he gets to Besaadi, Ngwe is robbed of all his money, making him perpetually dependent on his kind friend, Nwolefeck. He is almost killed in the University Resto when he struggles to get into the queue for food; he is brutalized during a student riot; above all, when he forms the Young Anglophone Movement to fight for Anglophone rights, Babajaro sends his wild police after him. Ngwe avoids death only by escaping to hide in the village.

Unlike in the Anglophone citadel of academic excellence of Wysdom College and College of Arts where discipline, orderliness, hardwork, and merit are the cardinal values for success, in Besaadi, fraud, personal interest, gambling, injustice and disorder are the order of the day. In the novel Francophones ideologically 'textualize' the Anglophone as the inferior Other. Their orientalisng attitude consists in perceiving him as a kind of comic freak whose behaviour gives rise to debasing appellations like 'anglofou, anglobête, esclave, salaud' etc..

Ngwe goes through a great deal of humiliation, degradation and grinding frustration which inflict on him traumatic stress disorders that, several times, bring him close to a nervous breakdown before he is finally done in. But he draws on his great presence of mind and is determined to make it in Besaadi. However, for all his tenacity onto his ethic of hard work and honesty, after six years in the university, and even changing faculties, his academic endeavours end in failure, leaving him with zero degree.

Gradually, it dawns on him that his humiliation is not an isolated fact but one shared by other Anglophones; it becomes clear to him that the Francophone government in place has a hidden agenda for a subtle deconstruction of

the Anglophone identity in the United Republic of Kamangola, with the university as the experimental nursery ground and that the Anglophones co-opted into the government are there to destroy the Anglo-Saxon culture. Consequently, Ngwe concludes that the older generation of Anglophones have failed and that unless the young people do something to rescue the situation soon, the Anglo-Saxon swan song may well soon be sung. Consequently, he forms the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM) to help keep alive the Anglo-Saxon heritage, to fight for the Anglophone rights to full citizenship and not just to be 'some assistant somebody' (138). In short, YAM's goal is to uphold the Anglophone identity.

To expand the scope of Anglophone victimhood and the education of the deprived, the author brings Ngwe into contact with Dr. Ambo, a Ph.D holder and the lone Anglophone lecturer in Besaadi University. Organized and hard-working, Dr. Ambo is intelligent and principled. Unfortunately, he does not teach full courses since he must do so only in French, a language, he does not master. Ngwe benefits a great deal from Dr. Ambo's critical intelligence and the subtle education of victimized Anglophone students.

It is thanks to Dr. Ambo's connection that Ngwe finds himself at the reception in the residence of a junior Anglophone Minister in charge of Special Duties at the Presidency, Mr. Wankili. This constitutes a pivotal episode in the text with regard to the Anglophone Problem and subalternity. It is here that Ngwe becomes more conscientised concerning the Anglophone condition of coloniality and inferior Otherness. The junior Anglophone Minister's outrageous declaration that his office will not be the place for solving petty Anglophone problems (134) as

well as the import of the conversation of two elderly Anglophone citizens, goes a long way to radicalize the young man. A statement from the conversation of the Anglophone citizens avers that the 'Francophone government uses our Anglophone brothers to destroy us, to ruin our heritage, to assimilate us, to clearly wipe out Anglophone traditions from the face of this country' (135).

That conversation marks a turning point in the life of Ngwe; he will never be the same person again. Its immediate effect on him is his resolve to form the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM), aimed at educating the Anglophones about their rights and full citizenship, and not to be contented with any second class status or 'an assistant citizen' (142). Here is a report of part of Ngwe's address to members of the Young Anglophone Movement:

... I told them that our elders betrayed us, sold us to slavery because of their greed but that we were not going to fold our arms and watch our fate twisted by people who by every standard were dreadfully inferior if merit were to be the guiding principle. There was need to fight back, to restore our prestigious Anglo-Saxon heritage which the British had inculcated in us. There was need to wrench our colonial heritage out of the machinery that had been placed with the task of gradual assimilation. We were gradually and forcefully being assimilated into Francophones. We had the right to be full citizens and not second-class citizens, to be full Ministers and Directors and not second-class Ministers and Directors. We needed Anglo-Saxon Universities. We had to return to the federal structure as instituted by the United Nations whereby (by)^{sc}

the Republic of Kamangola was considered an independent bilingual nation with two independent states, one English and the other French. (143)

Sometimes fiction can be more real than reality; occasionally imaginative writing can be two steps ahead of factuality. With regard to a need in Ngwe's report, that of the desire for Anglo-Saxon universities in Kamangola, we can say this much with reference to the larger social context of Nkengasong's text: The novel *Across the Mongolo* was published in 2004, and barely six years later, in 2010, the Head of State of Cameroon, President Paul Biya, created The University of Bamenda, the second Anglo-Saxon University of Cameroon, after the University of Buea. With the coming into existence of "The University of Bamenda, the promotion of the Anglo-Saxon tradition in Cameroon has been further strengthened, and the growth of the Anglophone Cameroon creative writing, a crucial aspect of the potential rise to greatness of the Anglophone Cameroonians is guaranteed " (Ambanasom 2012:341).

Ideas propagated by YAM will produce Anglophones proud of their Anglo-Saxon legacy and not traitorous sellouts and apologists for the majority Francophone culture. Among the Anglophone traitors must feature Kwenti, the Anglophone clerk who refuses to speak English to Anglophones, or the Anglophone police officer who instructs his Francophone colleagues in French to maltreat Ngwe better, or Junior Minister Wankili who declares publicly that he has nothing to do with 'Anglophone'.

These and similar Anglophones, eager to be associated or identified with the majority Francophone culture, facilitate the execution of Babajaro's assimilationist ideology. Since YAM's fundamental intention is to subvert

such an ideology, Ngwe, its fountainhead, becomes the sure target of Babajaro's dreaded police, from whom Ngwe has had a close shave. It is symbolically significant that at the end of the text, though physically and psychologically tortured and traumatized, the hero is still alive. He is the symbol of Anglophone hope. According to the Prince of Concealed Secrets, 'This child is of the powerful breed ... his anguish is the beginning of his mission in the world, a mission to rescue his people trapped into slavery in a far away land' (199), a declaration whose importance is even more heightened by its rhetorical placement: located in the text's penultimate page and paragraph.

It is now appropriate to say something about the Anglophone Problem already mentioned above. In the Republic of Cameroon, made up of, as we have said, the majority Francophones and minority Anglophones, the Anglophone Problem is the sum total of Anglophone grievances and wrongs that Anglophones express against their Francophone partners in the political union. In the words of Nja'ah Peter Toh (2001):

The Anglophones equally argue that successive Francophone regimes have pursued the policy of assimilation aimed at wiping out their identity. For instance, in 1983, the government promulgated an order modifying the General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination (Anglophone examinations) to be similar to the French Baccalaureat. There were general protest (sic) organised all over the country by the Anglophone community devoid of political leanings. The problem was so intense that the church in Cameroon became very vocal against the government's decision. (53)

In Buea, on the 2nd and 3rd April, 1993, the first ever All Anglophone Conference took place and over 5.000 Anglophones from all walks of life attended that conference to adopt a common stand with regard to constitutional issues related to their destiny in Cameroon. They crystalised their grievances against the Francophones and enshrined them in the now famous *Buea Declaration*, part of which reads as follows:

Within these thirty-two years, our Union accord has been violated. We have been disenfranchised, marginalized, and treated with suspicion. Our interests have been disregarded. Our participation in national life has been limited to non-essential functions. Our natural resources have been ruthlessly exploited without any benefit accruing to our territory or to its people. The development of our territory has been negligible and confined to areas that directly or indirectly benefit Francophones. Through manoeuvres and manipulations, we have been reduced from partners of equal status in the Union to the status of a subjugated people.

The common values, vision, and goals which we share as a people and those of our Francophone partners in the Union are different, and clearly cannot blend within the framework of a Unitary State such as was imposed on us in 1972 ...

The so-called 'Peace Revolution' of 1972 was a ploy by Francophones to use their overwhelming majority to alter the basis of reunification for which Anglophones, and Anglophones ONLY, had voted. The 1972

referendum was illegal in so far as it was not in conformity with the procedure which the constitution had laid down for the amendment of its provisions and also in so far as its aim was not only to impair the Federation's unity and integrity, but to abolish the Federation itself (qtd. in Ambanasom *Education* 27 – 28).

It is interesting to note that barely three years after reunification, in 1964, and nearly 30 years before the convening of the All Anglophone Conference, Professor Bernard Fonlon, with an uncanny sense of foresight, had prefigured what would happen. According to him unless the Francophone leadership, on whose shoulders lay the responsibility of steering Cameroon to its projected bicultural mission, was honest enough to accept the good things in the Anglo-Saxon culture, there was little chance for the survival of the latter in Cameroon (Fonlon 'Will We Make or Mar?' 12).

From the themes and issues raised in the text as well as the art informing the novel, we can affirm that what Nkengasong's imaginative work makes us 'see' or 'perceive' is the social mentality, the dominant ideology of the world from which the novel springs, and this is the epoch of President Ahmadou Ahidjo. Ideologically speaking, from the issues evoked in the novel, the shadowy but dreaded personality of Babajaro (Ahidjo) and his authoritarian rule, his ubiquitous and brutal police force, and the assimilationist educational policy that prevails at Besaadi to the detriment of Anglophones in a country that calls itself the Federal bilingual Republic of Kamangola, one can conclude that the political ideology in place is authoritarianism, defined by Andrew Heywood as 'a belief that a strong central authority, imposed from above is either desirable or

necessary and, therefore, demands unquestioning obedience' (328). However, this is contested by a counter ideology, federalism, emblemized by the Young Anglophone Movement (YAM) led by the brave and courageous central male character, Ngwe. YAM symbolizes Anglophones' hope and the Anglo-Saxon legacy in Kamangola. In other words Ngwe is struggling to maintain the ideology of federalism, equally defined by Heywood as 'A territorial distribution of power based on the sharing of sovereignty between central (usually national) bodies and periphery ones' (331).

Under the dominant prevailing ideology, the risks Anglophones like Ngwe and YAM run are real as testified below by a different kind of historical document:

We left the governor's office feeling satisfied. We, however, still ran the risk of being arrested, of becoming political prisoners! We were then not conscious of the risk we were running by openly criticizing an autocratic regime and its government, and through them the President of the Republic himself. We had forgotten that we were of Anglo-Saxon culture, with its very highly developed sense of freedom of expression, and that we were facing people of a culture that was different from ours (Tumi 32).

A bald statement of facts as contained in our summary and thematic exploration of *Across the Mongolo* is, indeed, inadequate, except, for a modest analysis of the text. These facts and ideas say little or nothing concerning the art that informs the work, the quality of the language, drama, feelings and emotions of the characters involved. They convey very little of the tension and excitement that

Nkengasong so successfully evokes, which is his forte. Consequently, we will attempt to highlight some of the expressive devices of technique employed by the author to achieve the novel's overall aesthetic effect.

The first of them is the use of madness as technique which allows the author to assume a unique and interesting angle of vision. Rarely do we find in a novel a dominant first person narrative perspective along side that of the omniscient narrator. We must, nevertheless, concede at the same time that there is no limit to what a creative play with language can achieve. Therefore, *Across the Mongolo* is a text whose creative construction allows for the existence of both, and this thanks to the author's ingenious deployment of madness as a device of technique. How this operates will be discovered by and by.

To achieve his desired angle of vision the author renders his central consciousness, Ngwe, mad, but not completely so. Ngwe's madness comes only at the end of his disappointing university experience. The novel then opens at this point where news about the mental derangement of this young man spreads like wild fire, the victim having been arrested and brought all the way from the city to a shrine in his rural Lebialem for traditional treatment by Aloh-Mbong, the priest of Fuandem.

The priest administers a concoction of herbs to him, putting some of it into his ears, his nostrils and some for him to drink in order to help him talk and tell the story of his life, and the cause of his madness. The ritualistic treatment produces the desired effect on Ngwe as he begins to talk, the shrine becoming his confessional, so to speak. Before Aloh-Mbong and some members of the local council, Ngwe starts to narrate his story which makes up the material in the text. However, and this is technically very significant,

there are interruptions in Ngwe's narrative when he suffers occasional bouts of seizure. And it is during the relapse that the omniscient narrator makes his interpolations, four in number, corresponding to four chapters: One, Four, Thirteen and Nineteen. Thus in a novel of nineteen chapters four are recounted by the omniscient narrator, and fifteen by Ngwe.

Ngwe's tale is in three parts; part one comprises chapters two and three; part two stretches from chapter five to twelve; and part three covers chapter fourteen to eighteen. Each section ends with a dramatic retrogression in Ngwe's mental condition. In this regard the ending of part three is particularly striking in the sense that he suffers a psycho-somatic effect; that is, when Ngwe is describing a troubled moment leading to his incipient insanity, the latter, paradoxically and effectively, comes on him again, so that the part of the narrative becomes not merely a re-enactment of madness but real madness, bringing to the final end Ngwe's first person narration.

The novel is then rounded off, as it was begun, by the omniscient narrator, making the interesting narrative structure of *Across the Mongolo* one that is not the work of chance but the result of a careful artistic design. The reconstruction of Ngwe's story makes for the use of elaborate flashbacks, reminding us of the plot construction of some of the best Nigerian movies very common in Cameroon these days.

After perusing Ngwe's story, the conscientious reader will realize that, following Ngwe's physical movement from Kama to Ngola and back to Kama, his overall story is structured roughly obeying the logic of triadic dialectic, that is, following the dialectical relationship of thesis,

antithesis and synthesis. In this respect Ngwe's educational career from primary to high school in the state of Kama is smooth and relatively uneventful. This constitutes the thesis. When he gets to Ngola for University education, however, he encounters a hostile and violent environment. Dialectically speaking, this becomes the antithesis, ushering in a conflictual situation leading to mental instability and incongruence in the young man.

For him, it is a question of to die or not to die, to echo Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. Thanks to the timely intervention of his lover, Shirila, Ngwe is saved from imminent death but not from ultimate insanity. For him to be appropriately cured of his madness, however, the author takes him back to Kama where under Aloh-Mbong's ritual care his health is gradually restored. This is the synthesis, which becomes the new thesis, reflecting the new Ngwe at 'the beginning of his mission in the world, a mission to rescue his people trapped into slavery in a far away land' (199).

Having chosen a victimized, otherwise ambitious young man, who has passed through challenging and trying situations and must now tell his own harrowing tale from a convalescent position, the author endows him with a unique idiom of more than ordinary beauty. Therefore, the discourse used by such a frustrated and disappointed man must be one that will carry effectively his frustration, bitterness, madness, anger and hatred against those responsible for his condition. Such an idiom is bound to be forceful and spirited, in short, lyrical in places.

Indeed, tinged with the eloquence of a mad brain, such is the lyrical power of Ngwe's narrative that it constitutes for this writer a key attraction and beauty of *Across the Mongolo*. Poetry is thus integral to this text,

being part and parcel of it. We are not talking here of purple poetic patches inserted as an after thought into the completed narrative such that if expunged, the text will not suffer. No. We are talking of poetry that is an organic component of the novel. In other words, if one were to delete the poetry from Ngwe's narrative, there would be no *Across the Mongolo*.

The more obviously lyrical aspects are those areas of the text where there are invocations wherein Ngwe is praying to Fuandem or addressing the spirit of his late father. But the usual poetic portions are those rhythmic parts of his narration marked by the rise and fall of his emotions, by his turbulent state of mind, depending on the nature of the physical, emotional, or mental pain inflicted on him. When his activities are frenzied or whenever Ngwe becomes hysterical, his prose by the same token becomes lyrical. On a few occasions the writing can become nonsensical or surrealistic, all of which qualities are symptomatic of Ngwe's incipient insanity. When, however, he is at peace with himself, or on the same romantic wavelength with his one-time sweetheart, Shirila, Ngwe is appropriately rhapsodic. At such moments he paints beautiful descriptions of Shirila, rhapsodizing her in memorable language.

The overall positive effect of this lyricism cannot be overemphasized. It endows the tale with high readability; it instills liveliness in the prose and discards boredom in the reader; it captures the attention of the readers and keeps them reading on and on. It makes for interesting, psychological and, therefore, realistic character exploration, especially that of the central consciousness. It is a quality likely to invite the reader back to the work, long after he must have read and put it away. Examples are many. With

regard to invocation and prayer one can make reference to pages 36, 94 and 159; the general lyrical portions include, among others, those on the following pages: 33, 110, 111, 112, 114, 138, 158, 163, 164, 165, 191, 192, etc.

Here we will quote two passages, a short and a long one, to illustrate some of the means by which the lyrical effects are achieved:

Then, leaning on the wall, I cried. I could not say what I was doing there. What offence had I committed against man, against God? Why did they maltreat an innocent child that much? Why was I made to suffer assault and brutality without cause? Why was I born an Anglophone? Mother, my mother, you had refused my going away from you! Here was your son in a university taking lectures in a dungeon to become a man tomorrow. Here is your son in this dark hole taking lectures to become a corpse. Here I was, who wanted to be like Babajoro of Kamangola in my lecture hall, what I had travelled hundreds of miles away from you to do. Soldiers and policemen have become my teachers in the detention room. (110)

This short passage carries Ngwe's thoughts following his mistreatment by soldiers and police. They have just hurled him into a dark cell containing naked criminals. The lyrical effects are realized by means of, first, a succession of four rhetorical wh-questions followed by an exclamatory statement, an apostrophe, to Ngwe's mother. This, in turn, is followed by three parallel statements whose anaphoric beginnings are: 'Here was your son ... Here is your son ... Here I was ...' The passage is then beautifully clinched by an ironic statement, a reminder and a synopsis of the parallel

statements: 'Soldiers and policemen have become my teachers in the detention room'.

Incidentally, a slight portion of this passage: 'Why was I born an Anglophone? Mother, my mother' recalls a similar utterance in Okot p'Bitek's poem *Song of Ocol*.

'Mother, mother,
Why,
Why was I born
Black?' (p'Bitek 126)

The intertextual echoes seem to affirm the centrality of the mother figure in the imagination of a sensitive African child at a critical existential moment in his life.

Here is the second, longer passage:

"I sat at the edge of the pavement of the faculty, staring into the vacancy of the mundane universe of a university. The happy ones who spoke the language of my brothers on the other side of the Great River laughed and chatted merrily about the place. The Anglo, the pariah, the slave like me was compelled to escort them in that world and admire them in their unsubstantial galore and excellence...

"An inexplicable dizziness shrouded me. I turned my eyes away from the human bustle and looked towards a distant hill that towered above life towards the sky, the face of a rock hung on one side and a sparse vegetation of giant forest trees sat on its flanks up to its peak. My mind became the explosion ground for the tremors of the world. My head pounded like a mortar in which palm nuts were crushed. I became dizzy and weak, talking to people I did

not know, people I did see, voices clattering in my ears, voices laughing at jokes that had no humour in them, dry twiggy jokes that had no taste. I wished that I stood at the top of Lebialem and tumbled myself into the water of life to cut a long boring story short. God of Abraham, God of Lebialem, God of my ancestors, God of knowledge! Did you that made the chicken make the poison of the snake, the deadly claws of the kite, and the fatal jaws of greedy men? For what purpose am I forsaken? For what reason do I live?

"There was a voice bantering in my soul: 'Ngwe, leave that despair over petty things and stare into the bosom of the universe for the truth. The living things are in the hills and the valleys, the slopes and the ridges. You are the son of the hills and the valleys. You are the son of the dales and the caves under the giant rocks. You are the child of the bushes and the thickets in which abound the abundance of life and to all these wonders of the universe you are bound. The truth is hidden in the womb of the universe that you see. Seek nature and disregard plastic truths of your oppressors. The fine synthetic tissues that embroider their skins are unloving. We in the hills and the valleys, the ridges and the slopes are the light of life.'

"A train of clouds paraded gracefully from one slope to the other and finally shrouded one of the slopes. It gave the image of a winged man and woman who were making a flurry crescent beneath the sun, and when the sun

came to full view the clouds were tossed away in disorder. I heard the voices beyond the crescent shore of the hill, voices reverberating with sounds familiar with the talking drums at the entrance of the Attah palace. Laughter alluring and assuring cramming my senses and subduing me into a wistful delirium I could not understand. Ho! Ho! Hoooooooo!

"A fairy hand touched me on the shoulder. The fresh warmth of her palm gyrated through my body and I heard a voice call, 'Ngwe.' I was startled. I turned and beheld Shirila. She came right round to my side, holding me on the shoulder.

"'Ngwe,' her fairy voice echoed in my mind. It sounded like the voice of eternity. 'Ngwe,' she called again. I looked drearily at her face. I watched the tears roll on her hand and drop on my leg. I turned and looked away.

"'Ngwe, what is the matter with you? Why are you so altered? You look really pale and unkempt. Ngwe, tell me,' she said, shaking me light on the shoulder, almost weeping herself.

"She stared fixedly into my eyes but I did not feel anyone's presence. My mind was gone and I could only hear the solid metallic voice echoing from the depths of Fuandem's shrine.

"Ngwe, I have watched you from a distance. You don't seem to be yourself. Please, tell me what is really wrong with you,' she urged.

"'Shirila, I don't know, I cannot say,' I told her wearily, becoming more and more aware of myself.

“Come. Let’s go to my room,’ she said.
She held my hand and helped me to my feet.
(163-166)

Ngwe’s depressive thoughts in this passage are engendered by the disappointing reality that at the end of four years in Besaadi he has failed his exams again, ‘burning his mandat’, meaning that he is no longer entitled to a stipend if he wishes to continue in the same Faculty. The depiction of the peculiar movement of his thoughts and the subtle changes in the quality of the thoughts lend to the texture of the writing here an admirable lyrical grace achieved by means worth pointing out. Besides, Ngwe tells his story with the aid of concrete images, parallel construction, and a characteristic turn of phrase, drawing from a creative spring essentially romantic. Some aspects of Ngwe’s discourse are reminiscent of the idiom of the canonical Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth and, to a limited extent, B.P. Shelley and John Keats with reference to the use of nature images and vocabulary like hills, valleys, dales, caves, rocks, bushes, thickets, nature, universe, clouds, sun, ridges, etc.

When Ngwe is being urged by a secret inner voice to disregard the antics of his sophisticated but inhuman oppressors and seek consolation in nature; when he is told ‘We in the hills and the valleys, the ridges and the slopes are light of life,’ the reader is reminded of the poetic truth in the poem “You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed” by the famous Nigerian poet, Gabriel Okara (24-25). There is a Biblical allusion implied in the question: ‘For what purpose am I forsaken?’ That question alludes to the Passion, the period of great suffering and death of Christ, when at the peak of his agony he cried: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mt. 27:46) or to the Psalmist’s cry of

anguish to the same effect (Psalm 22:1). This Biblical allusion has the effect of heightening the agony that Ngwe, a mere human, went through in Besaadi. These literary and Biblical echoes add richness, depth, charm and pleasure to Nkengasong's prose, making it enjoyable to read.

The lyrical effects of this passage are realized through parallelism and the modulation of certain words. Parallelism has to do with parallel construction which incorporates repetition of certain words or phrases while the rest of the structure slightly varies; that is, a parallelism consists of invariable and variable components. The repetitions are the invariable structures, while the rest of the expressions are the variable ones.

In this passage our first parallel structure is a three-tier construction that begins with: 'I was'; that is, the invariable components anaphorically repeated three times are 'I was ... I was ... I was ...' while the rest of the expressions vary. The latter utterances begin respectively with '... an intruder in the company ... the Anglo incapable ...; just in the world to ...' Now these parallel sentences do not come in quick succession, but are reasonably spaced out, so that the repetition: 'I was' is like a peak followed by a lull, then another peak and then a lull, creating, more or less, a measured repetition, a rhythm, a rise and fall that embodies the lyricism in Nkengasong's prose.

The second parallelism is less elaborate but equally effective; it consists of four exclamatory phrases in quick succession:

'God of Abraham, God of Lebialelem, God of my *ancestors*, God of knowledge!' The invariable (fixed) component that is repeated four times is 'God of', followed, respectively, by 'Abraham', 'Lebialelem', 'my ancestors', and 'knowledge'. The parallelism in quick succession here has

the effect of giving emphasis and power to the author's words.

The third parallelism is the one produced by the secret voice addressing Ngwe and stressing the fact that he is the child of not an urban but rural setting, a three-tier parallel construction which runs thus: 'You are the son of the hills and the valleys. You are the son of the dales and the caves under the giant rocks. You are the child of the bushes and the thickets ...'

A principle of parallelism is operational here. It holds that similarity in form leads to easy identification of similarity in content and function. It means that the main verbs and their objects in the sentences referred to carry equal weight and are of equal importance. With reference to our last parallelism, this means that the hills and the valleys, the dales and the caves, the bushes and the thickets are of equal importance and weight in Nkengasong's reckoning.

Nkengasong's condition of coloniality is an interesting phenomenon evident in his text. He is a post-colonial subject whose text is written in an imperial language, English. But the intimate and immediate circumstances of his life that make up his subject matter are Cameroonian (African). He is a child of two worlds; the one by virtue of his British colonial educational upbringing, the other by his close attachment to his Nweh tradition. His characters speak in English but an English transformed, in many cases, to reflect the idioms, and rhythms of Nweh native speakers, a reality signifying Nkengasong's hybridity. 'Ngwe, who went to Besaadi many years ago to *learn book* in that big school *where book ends*, had lost his head' (1). Therefore, to go by the flavour of the language of its characters, any informed student of literature in English reading *Across The Mongolo*, will instantly recognize it for what it is: a

post-colonial text belonging not to English literature but to literatures in English.

Technically speaking, the author handles plot, structure, characterization, language and narrative perspective well. He shows ingenuity in conceiving the narrative point of view, focalized essentially from the text's central consciousness, with only occasional interpolations from the omniscient narrator.

After everything, then, *Across the Mongolo's* uniqueness resides in the fact that it attempts to transcend merely deconstructing Anglophone victimhood to reconstructing some of the positive values that constitute the "Anglophonesty" that Anglophones are yearning to perpetuate. Within the Cameroonian context this novel is a serious indictment of Francophone hegemony, and a scathing attack on Anglophones who deny the existence of the Anglophone Problem. Ultimately, the text amounts to an unsettling interrogation of history, a people, the Cameroonian society as a whole. A gripping human story beautifully conceived and constructed, it is a lyrical, soulful cry from a sensitive mind, and a significant contribution to the development of the Cameroon novel in English.

The Death Certificate

Alobwed'Epie's *The Death Certificate* (2004)⁶ is a national allegory of great resonance which, like Bole Butake's dramatic parable, *And Palm Wine Will Flow* (1999), is set in a fictional African country called Ewawa. The text's anti-hero is Mongo Meka who, whether dead or alive, remains the subject of interest for most of the narrative, and this because of his pivotal, if unpatriotic, function in the novel.

A native of the First Province and doubling as Treasurer General and Acting Director General of the Central Bank, Mongo Meka is the keeper of the keys to these financial

institutions. He therefore enjoys unlimited access to cash at any time. Being an unconscionable individual, however, he embezzles the whopping sum of FCFA 550 billion, most of which he stashes away in a Parisian bank under the name of his French wife, and then fakes death in a road accident in a neighbouring country, in a bid to forestall a possible prosecution for denuding the national treasury.

His death is mourned, and he is duly buried, with a certificate of death having been established in his name. Taking Meka's death in earnest, however, his widow, Antoinette Yvonne, remarries, this time, a French man, Roger Girard, a development that threatens Meka's machinations, forcing him to come back from the land of the dead to embarrass the living, with his ghostly reappearance. He initiates costly lawsuits against the French couple with the intention of putting them asunder. However, Meka is hoisted with his own petard, as his stratagem becomes a boomerang. His death certificate being genuine, Meka is legally considered dead, and the man now 'masquerading' as Mongo Meka, an impostor! To further compound Meka's discomfiture, his alienated wife dies in a cyclone at sea in Australia, leaving her French husband the inheritor of Mongo Meka's FCFA 350 billion in her account, legally putting the money far beyond Meka's reach, a dramatic turn of events that impels the now impoverished and fugitive Meka to commit suicide in France.

To have a rough idea of the administrative setup of Ewawa, it is instructive to mathematically conceptualize it in terms of ten concentric circles each representing a province, thus making a total of ten concentric provinces. The province in the centre, the seat of political power and economic influence, is known as the first province. The closer one is to the centre of power and influence, the

more satisfied or less censorious one is with regard to the system: and the reverse is true, discontent emanating from the periphery. Criticism is thus proportional to the distance from the centre, and the prerogative of the marginalized. No wonder, then, that the greatest critics of the government come from the marginal 9th and 10th Provinces (Ambanasom Review *Death Certificate* 8).

There is the hegemony of citizens of the First and Second provinces in all spheres of influence. They constitute the core of national bourgeoisie. They head key ministries, major lucrative companies and organizations, key financial institutions, the army, the gendarmerie and the police, etc. Their identifying terms are the kinship idioms of 'sons and daughters of the soil', or brothers and sisters of the First Province. What is at work here is the 'ethnification' of politics, since tribal Manichaeism is everywhere manifest. Perceiving themselves as the superior Self, fellows from the First and Second Provinces orientalize those of the peripheral provinces as the inferior Other.

Here one notices the collapse of the rational rules and regulations that governed the running of the Westphalian bureaucracy. They are replaced by conventions of group solidarity. In this patrimonial renaissance setting, we have in place an administrative system run by neo-patrimonialists who identify themselves with a particular ethnicity. The rational boundary that distinguishes between the Ministry and the Minister, the office and the officeholder, is blurred. Now the Minister is identified as belonging to an ethnic group by virtue of kinship relationship with the Minister or officeholder. During the planning meeting for Mongo Meka's funeral rites, the Minister of Territorial Administration, referring to some absent Ministers, does so employing a kinship discourse to stress the fact that we

are talking here of a tribe's Ministers, and not just any Ministers belonging to a universal national administration: '... I believe that five of our brother Ministers who are not yet here will not let us down ...' (2).

The monopoly of national financial resources by the citizens of the First and Second Provinces is dictated by selfishness and gross disregard for people belonging to other tribes. This is tribalism. But, as Godfrey B. Tangwa (1996) says, it need not be so:

The mere fact of belonging to a tribal group is not tribalism. It is not tribalism to form or to belong to tribal cultural or development groups, to 'drink' tribal *njangis* or even to fight for the improvement and welfare of members of your tribe. Tribalism is only involved when there is injustice, unfairness, prejudice or discrimination, *vis-à-vis* others ... If people always reasoned or reflected before acting or reacting, tribalism would have no place in their lives. (58)

Tribalism, as seen by the fellows of the First and Second Provinces of Ewawa, is the theory and practice of ethnic politics; those of their elite charged with the management of public affairs are ruled and dominated by feelings of ethnic consideration. Since the elite in authority deal with power and economics, power in sharing resources, often scarce resources, they are bound, sooner or later, to betray their ethnic inclination when confronted with difficult questions as to who has what, when, and how much. They are constrained by strong, selfish ethnic attachment to give preference to people from the same area like them when giving out positions, posts, contracts or scholarships. They hardly, therefore, reason or reflect on the adverse consequences of their act. With ethnicity thus exalted,

nepotism, favouritism and tribalism are accentuated in the novel.

The central theme, dwarfing all the other themes of the text, is repressive tribalism as an ideology. It is the organized pillage and unconscionable squandermania by members of a single tribe. These citizens manage public, money-generating institutions as if they were their private enterprises, running them wastefully; the money generated is spent as if the spenders are in a contest, i.e. as if they are striving to grab the trophy for the greatest squanderer, for the biggest spendthrift. The wastrels consume money as if the world is going to end tomorrow. They dole out huge sums of money to relatives, friends and loved ones; they lavish impossible sums of money on themselves to sustain their wasteful, concupiscent lifestyles; they put a great deal of money into gigantic, ostentatious projects; they erect fabulous castles in the middle of the tropical forest; some go on expensive shopping sprees in Europe; others, like the Director of the Farmer's Cooperative Bank, (48), turn many expensive government vehicles at their disposal into their private cars to run their errands. The novel evokes huge financial figures that can make one dizzy; in places the sheer size of these figures is simply staggering and unfathomable. This is what we call in Marxist Criticism conspicuous consumption. These bourgeois consume goods with a compulsive, pathological appetite.

A lifestyle like this is the central source of the corruption for which many African countries have become notorious today. Alobwed'Epie, in a way, rewrites Bate Besong's *Beasts of no Nation* (2003) a dramatic piece which holds that corruption in 'Ednouay' has become 'an industry' wherein

... frogs eat money
The way locusts
Eat tonnes of green (102).

A behaviour like this cannot go on forever without obvious negative consequences; if it persists unchecked, it is bound to breed, sooner or later, untold unsavoury effects.

In his rave review of the text under discussion, Bate Besong said *The Death Certificate* 'is alternative fiction that anticipates, in every way, the better world of the future. It therefore entails a major shift in vision...' (Besong 'Prodigals' 9). In the sequel to the review he went on:

The novelist strikingly uses a symbolic language to depict the First Province's corrosive legacy, in order, to give a powerful visual effect to the fictional conflict adumbrated, and economize verbiage. His parables are short, bold and to their point. The first and third omniscient points of view form the dominant narrative voice in *The Death Certificate*, with the authorial voice constantly coming in, to make comments on the Nebuchadnezzar inclinations of the Ewawa Eboni Society members he is describing and evaluating...

The Death Certificate challenges the traditional western modes of presenting time, character, setting and other aspects of reality. It celebrates neologisms or word coinages, unorthodox use of French, Ewondo-Ezoum-Bulou, asymmetric and random renderings ... but it is also fiction, that overwhelmingly demonstrates that the post-colonial Cameroonian/African novel is an open form, and that there is no ideal form to which that genre must conform. It is broad enough to

include such oral elements as narrative formulae, arresting images, alliterations, puns, exclamations, ideophones and aphorisms, digressions; counter-myths, oracular candour. Again and again, in *The Death Certificate*, the vision centres on the idea that no new society can be built in our trouble (sic) history unless there is social revolution which destroys, completely, the existing socio-political structure. Ewawa's problems will not be solved peacefully,. When the child is coming from its mother's womb, he will come with blood. If there is no bloodshed, Ewawa, cannot have justice. (Besong 'Prodigals' 8)

In these quoted passages, Bate Besong makes some very pertinent points about Alobwed'Epie's first novel, especially with regard to its innovatory technique and overall radical ideological temper. However, in his enthusiastic response to the work, Besong, in our humble opinion, seems to have over-stated one thing while overlooking another, both with reference to technique. We do not agree with Besong when he says 'The first and the third omniscient point of views form the dominant narrative voice in *The Death Certificate*, with the authorial voice constantly coming in to make comments ...' This is because, as we have stated below, there is no authorial voice per se in this work, but rather a couple of first person narrators, unless we take the intelligent critical narrators, all of them mouthpieces of the author, to be Alobwed'Epie himself, which is quite a different thing from a third person omniscient narrator, anyway. Technically speaking, therefore, Alobwed'Epie has completely effaced himself in this work.

With regard to the author's exploration of alternative ideological visions, Bate Besong is right to accentuate the revolutionary option for a new society. But to rule out categorically the possibility of a peaceful option artistically adumbrated is to fail to read the signs that the author subtly inscribes in his text. Having said this, however, in every other particular, Besong's observations are generally to the point.

In addition to what Bate Besong has said, *The Death Certificate* exhibits a characteristic that postmodernists would like to celebrate because it is not usually associated with the typical traditional novel: the mixing of literary genres. As it explores and develops the absorbing story of the grubby banker, Mongo Meka, the text appears, in places, as a thriller, a detective novel, a piece of investigative journalism, a psychological, realistic novel, or a saga; it contains a handful of poems and several letters; it embodies passages from the Bible and elements from African orature. Accordingly, the language changes its texture; that is to say, Alobwed'Epie makes his prose, in places, conform to this or that set style. In short, the prose is stylized. In places it can read like a piece of satire, a didactic piece, a sermon, a parable, or a story told in imitation of oral tale; in places the text reads like legalese, journalese or just a thriller, etc. A few pages even read like financial balance sheets. All of these postmodernist features signal the fragmentation of the 'authentic' novel, the disappearance of the 'real'. To the postmodernists this mixing of styles signalizes an exhilarating and liberating escape from the 'claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief' (Barry 84).

Incidentally, some aspects of this modernist/postmodernist characteristic are also found in L.T. Asong's *Salvation Colony* (1997) and Nsanda Eba's *The Multimillionaire* (1998). However, in African literature, the first African novelist to consciously use them extensively is the famous Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his satirical novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982). As he comments on the genesis of his novel, Ngugi rationalizes his innovatory technique in the following words:

... I would use any and everything I had ever learnt about the craft of fiction – allegory, parable, satire, narrative, description, reminiscence, flashback, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dialogue, drama – provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme and story. But content – not language and technique – would determine the eventual form of the novel. And content? The Kenyan people's struggles against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism. (qtd. in Cook and Okenimkpe 120)

From the point of view of focalization, Alobwed'Epie has deployed an ingenious narrative technique wherein the story is told by a crew of narrators, putative authors, with their own techniques; that is, different perspectives are adopted by them to comment on the same or related event, a kind of polyphonic narrative in which no narrator alone owns the complete truth, although the sum total of the various accounts constitutes the whole truth: knowledge about Mongo Meka, his kinsmen and the state of the national economy of Ewawa.

In creating these narrators to tell his story, Alobwed'Epie maintains his aesthetic distance. Among the

key narrators are Mula, Nchinda, Musa and Ndjock, with Mula being the linchpin and the most conscientised of them all. They are university graduates, jobless because they come from marginal provinces; in contrast, their counterparts from the First and Second Provinces have jobs. Mula plays a crucial, albeit, indirect, formative role in the development of the critical consciousness of the readers and some of the other narrators. Without the exercise of their critical intelligence and the deployment of the skills of investigative reporting, much of the narrative, as we have it, would not have been so constructed; the facts, the comments and the truth, as they appear in the text, would not have been so presented, either.

The central narrators are the characters through whom Alobwed'Epie carries out the education of the deprived, and the marginalized. It is thanks to the kind of language with which he invests the discourse of the putative authors that citizens from the peripheral provinces can become conscientised about the havoc wrought on the national economy by a profligate ethnic group. The financial recklessness of the latter is pushing the country onto the brink of a revolution and chaos as evident in the apocalyptic discourse of the narrators. Alobwed'Epie, through the agency of the educators of the marginalized, makes this clear, thanks to their disturbing, figurative language.

In this regard, addressing Mula early in the novel, Nchinda says: 'These fellows of the First Province are going to rake this country bare ... This country is jubilating on a volcano of mismanagement, corruption and embezzlement. There's pus in our boil, it will burst' (12). The very idea of a possible violent reaction that this provocative squandermania may give rise to is reiterated on page 51 with Musa talking to Mula:

For one thing, our leaders according to you are amassing wealth, they are depriving the common man of the bounty of our country. If this continues, they will become Louis XVI of France, his nobles and the clergy. It may be that's the situation we are living now with the way mere Directors flash 70.000.000 Frs. Pajeros around. So, ours may be in fact, the feudal system, now, 25 years only after independence. If, as you advocate, we should fight against the shackles of the system, then of course, we shall be reliving the experience of the storming of the Bastille and its consequences (51).

Musa re-echoes this on page 192: 'We are brooding on an active volcano', which thought comes close to being practically enacted in the opening paragraph of the penultimate chapter of the text, as the whole nation is seething with anger and hatred against the denuders of the national treasury: 'The hatred had taste and smell. It was solid, as a bulldozer and moved like flowing lava. It hung in the air, on walls, everywhere. It was total' (295).

Thus through these unsettling, colourful representations of reality, Alobwed'Epie is subtly educating, sensitizing the common masses on what they can do. Therefore, the possibility of violence is real, but it is only an alternative option for a new society. Every significant work of art sets in motion a social dialogue. And the kind of social debate inspired by a work like *The Death Certificate* centres around many socio-political issues, including violence, how to avoid the kind of violence imaginatively articulated by the novelist, in favour of peace. Nobody in his right mind would advocate violence for its sake. When

the Cameroonian society can draw a lesson from such a novel, its merit becomes clear. Herein lies the ultimate social relevance of Alobwed'Epie's text. In the words of Archbishop Paul Verdzekov, 'violence'

is not an issue that should be treated lightly, while sitting comfortably at one's desk, sipping a cup of coffee and eating a slice of bread. The violence Cardinal Tumi wants our country to avoid brings to mind certain images that would make any sensible person cry, throw up or burst out in indignation. Whoever dares to write on violence without having as sole aim to express his or her profound indignation, is committing a sin (16-17).

Another figurative representation would suggest that a new society can still be constructed through an inclusive peaceful forum of national reconciliation, suggested by Marie-Claire's father. Talking to her in a discourse full of allegorical significance, he says the cleansing of FramMki, Marie-Claire's defiled son, is not an individual affair, but one that involves the larger community:

The cleansing will require an assembly of the elders of our two communities. They will sit and discuss what happened, what provoked the elephant to trample on the crab. After that the two communities will invite herbalists on both sides and they will do the cleansing not only of the child, but of you and the Minister himself too – if there is yaws on one part of the body, the whole body is contaminated. Even your President is not free' (303).

However, any such gathering will not come easily, in view of the strong antipathy of some of those who matter;

for, according to the Minister of Territorial Administration (M.T.A.), for instance, 'Only over our dead bodies can natives in the form of traditional doctors put us on trial. They can go to hell. Zero cleansing' (304). Should this declaration signify the possible failure of the peaceful option imaginatively proffered by the author, then the novelist is left only with the revolutionary choice.

For all his radical authorial ideology, however, Alobwed'Epie's ultimate artistic ambition is to bring about a new, prosperous and peaceful Cameroonian society. His goal is to explore ways for the emergence of a Cameroonian society fair and just to all its citizens with no discrimination. Indeed, the following words on Cardinal Tumi's intention in his recent book will perfectly fit Alobwed'Epie's intention in writing his novel:

The author's only ambition is to see the emergence of a new Cameroon with men and women who love their country and serve it in all transparency and honesty. This Cameroon is only possible if citizens understand that real happiness lies in doing everything possible to make others happy, that one cannot be happy alone (Verdzekov 17).

The novelists discussed in this chapter, Tah Asongwed, Francis Nyamnjoh, John N. Nkengasong and Alobwed'Epie are not avowed Marxists for all we know; comparatively speaking their works are not conceived from an orthodox socialist vision of the world like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* or, for that matter, the two Ngugis's *I Will Marry When I Want*. However, there is no denying that *Born to Rule*, *The Disillusioned African*, *Across the Mongolo* and *The Death Certificate* are texts whose

conception and construction, from the authorial ideologies contained therein, have been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by Marxist thought. Their critical, radical tone lends to their authors' worldview something close to a socialist vision, necessitating thus a Marxist or at least a progressive interpretation such as that given them in this chapter.

The tenor of our discussion boils down to this, that the four Cameroonian novelists are visionaries who handle their common subject matter, the Cameroonian society, with intelligence and concern as they imaginatively explore it with its future in view. They propose counter ideologies to subvert the prevailing hegemonies for alternative constructions. With Asongwed, Nyamnjoh and Alobwed'Epie it is radical education for critical consciousness with which to unsettle the conservative ideology of the neo-patrimonialist; and with Nkengasong it is federalism with which to contest the assimilationalist authoritarianism that dominates. It is therefore the novelists' intention to artistically instruct and persuade the readers to view things radically as they (the authors) do for a meaningful societal deconstruction.

End Notes

* This chapter is an updated version of Chapter Seven of my *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression*. (2007:214)

1. Tah Asongwed. *Born to Rule*. Silver Spring: Heritage Publishing Company, 1993. All further page references are to this edition.
2. Francis B. Nyamnjoh. *Mind Searching*. Awka: Kucena Damian Nigeria Limited, 1991. All further page references are to this edition.
3. Francis B. Nyamnjoh. *The Disillusioned African*. Limbe: NOOREMAC PRESS, 1995. All further page references are to this edition.
4. John Nkemngong Nkengasong. *Across the Mongolo*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2004. All further page references are to this edition.
5. John Nkemngong Nkengasong. *The Widow's Might*. Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 2006. All further page references are to this edition.
6. Alobwed'Epie. *The Death Certificate*. Yaoundé: Editions CLE 2004. All further page references are to this edition.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

***Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Ngugi wa Mirri's
I WILL MARRY WHEN I WANT****

I Will Marry When I Want is the story of how Kiguunda, a poor worker, loses his valuable 1½ acres of dry land to his employer, Ahab Kioi, a wealthy farmer and local director of a big company. Thinking that he can use the Christian religion to tame the respected Kiguunda who will then influence his other workers to his economic advantage, Ahab Kioi persuades Kiguunda and his wife Wangeci to become Christians and remarry in the church. Without knowing the real intention of Kioi, the Kiguundas agree to have a church wedding, if only because it may facilitate the marriage of their daughter Gathoni, now going out with Kioi's son, John Muhuuni.

To have enough money for their church wedding, Kiguunda obtains a bank loan with his 1½ acres as security. And the director of the bank is Ahab Kioi. With the money he richly equips his house and buys for themselves expensive wedding clothes, etc. But before Kiguunda and Wangeci can finalise their church wedding, Gathoni arrives in tears, saying that John Muhuuni has put her in the family way before kicking her out of his life. The Kiguundas suspend their own marriage arrangements, and rush to Ahab Kioi

to tell him that the children had better marry first. Ahab Kioi reacts angrily, in an un-Christian manner. He says he cannot imagine his well-brought up son committing such a blunder as he is accused of, nor his family bowing to such a low marriage connection with the Kiguundas' family. He scolds them for their carelessness in bringing up their daughter, challenging them to take the matter to court if they think they can succeed.

Kioi's wicked intentions now clear, the enraged Kiguunda threatens to stab him. Under duress from Kiguunda, Kioi is about to sign a compromising document when his wife, Jezebel, arrives with a gun to liberate him. Kiguunda is dismissed from his job, an act that makes it impossible for him to pay back his bank loan. Frustrated, he resorts to heavy drinking, and begins to sell some of his newly acquired household effects to finance this habit. And because he has defaulted on his bank loan, his 1½ acres are auctioned out. The buyer is Ahab Kioi.

Beyond Kiguunda this story is about the merciless exploitation of poor Kenyans by their own rich Kenyan brothers who collaborate with big foreign businessmen (capitalists). The capitalists employ poor Kenyans who produce so much wealth that makes the employers richer and richer while the workers get poorer and poorer, because they are grossly underpaid.

After the humiliation of Kiguunda by Kioi, Gicaamba, who has been educating Kiguunda throughout the play with regard to the cruel exploitation of the poor by the rich, mobilizes all the workers and progressive forces. He educates them and rounds off his mass education of the deprived in a rousing, revolutionary manner.

The workers now know the methods and intentions of their enemies and are united in their common struggle

against them. The play ends with a revolutionary song, calling on all workers, including those in the audience, to rise up and unite against their common enemies, the ruthless capitalist exploiters. All citizens are called upon to choose their sides in the impending revolution, to elect to be either on the side of the exploiters, or on that of the exploited masses.

Gicaamba's education is not limited to only inciting the masses to rise up against their exploiters. He also calls on the people to re-examine their male chauvinistic attitude towards women. Girls like Gathoni are suffering in rich people's homes or serving in disreputable public places today largely because they have been deprived of formal education. Gicaamba is thus appealing to parents to rethink the education of their daughters.

As for the political education of the masses, it goes beyond the central actors in the play to embrace the bulk of the audience. The enemies of the poor people in Kenya are the big economic operators, the big business people, the owners of the big companies or multinational co-operations, who employ the masses for very low salaries. And the main prayer of these economic exploiters and oppressors of the poor is the following:

Oh, God in heaven,
Shut the eyes of the poor
The workers and peasants
The masses as a whole
Ensure that they never wake up and
open their eyes
To see what we are really doing to
them! (113-114)

To face such a formidable enemy Gicaamba says the masses have to unite: "Unity is our strength and wealth." The play ends with a rousing song that involves everybody:

Soloist: 'The Trumpet'

All: The trumpet of the masses has been blown
We are tired of being robbed
We are tired of land grabbing
We are tired of salary
We are tired of charity and abuses

Soloist: The Trumpet

All: The trumpet of the poor has been blown.
Let's unite and organize
Organization is our club
Organization is our sword
Organization is our gun
Organization is our shield
Organization is our way
Organization is our strength
Organization is our light
Organization is our wealth

Soloist: The Trumpet

All: Of the workers has been blown
There are two sides in the struggle
The side of the exploiters and that of the exploited
On which side will you be when

Soloist: The Trumpet –

All: Of the worker is finally blown? (116).

The revolutionary song thus ends with a big question addressed to both the actors and the audience. A question that asks them to identify themselves with either of the

two social classes in Kenya: the exploiters, or exploited, the oppressors, or the oppressed, the stingy and insensitive employers, or the poorly paid masses. A play like this is likely to drive a restive audience mad at the end of the performance. Indeed, it is said that this very play had in Kenya just such an effect, to the extent that it was one of the reasons for Ngugi wa Thiong'o's imprisonment shortly after it was performed.

Some of the major themes of the play are: ruthless and inhuman capitalism, or the exploitation of the poor masses, misuse of religion, or Christian hypocrisy, Mau Mau and the anti-imperialist sentiment, education of the deprived, and the call for social justice.

The way the capitalists like Kioi, Ndugire and Ikuua treat workers under them is, to say the least, inhuman. Kiguunda is a worker under Kioi, and is supposed to be the most highly paid, with a salary of 200 shillings. Another highly paid worker is the submissive, uncomplaining 'mature' tractor driver. With the rising cost of living, 200 shillings is a paltry sum indeed. If this were a good salary, Kiguunda's home would not look like that of the people living below the poverty line: a single room, a single bed, and a single chair, and the house very poorly furnished. The Kiguundas cannot meet their minimum daily needs. Wangeci is unable to buy sugar and tea leaves at the same time. When they receive visitors in their one-roomed house, smoke makes them uncomfortable.

Despite this poverty, the Kiguundas do their best to entertain their rich guests, Kioi and his wife, and Ndugire and his. But how do the rich tycoons, in turn, treat their poor guests? They do so with scorn, contempt, and disrespect. They give them no food, refuse Wangeci tea,

and propose for Kiguunda water from the drum near the pigsty.

Despite their enormous wealth, the Kiois and the Ikuuas are still after the dry patch of land owned by the poor Kiguunda – his invaluable 1½ acres. The main plot of the play, summarized above, concerns the legal but heartless manner in which Kiguunda loses his 1½ acres. As soon as it is established that he has defaulted on his bank loan, the 1½ acres are auctioned out. And they are bought by the same person who is Kiguunda's employer, the same person who is also the director of the bank. In other words, the very ruthless capitalist who has been paying Kiguunda slave wages, has finally killed him by using the capitalist trick to kick him pitilessly and mercilessly out of his only meaningful 'earthly cargo'. This is how Kiguunda describes his experience on the day of the auction sale:

When I left the auction place
I thought I should revisit the piece of land
For a last glance,
A kind of goodbye
Who did I find there?
Kioi wa Kanoru, Ikuua wa Nditika
Plus a group of whites
I fled.

But their open laughter followed me... (111)

If Kiguunda, who is supposed to be so highly paid, can lead this subhuman existence, one can only imagine the type of deplorable life led by the poorer majority below him. Ndugire announces with pride the cruel method he has adopted to discipline workers who would like to take off from work without his permission. He pays them this month's salary in the middle of the next month; so, if any

workers decide to quit, they lose some money that goes into the capitalist's pocket!

Industrial capitalism is seen at its most merciless in the factory and industrial experience of Gicaamba. A conscientized factory worker, Gicaamba has learned a lot about the cruelty of the system that has got him, his family and many others trapped in many years of very insufficient pay. His impassioned description of his regular drudgery in factory work is breath-taking. Yet, for all their commitment to industrial capitalism, the system does not only underpay them; under it they are bereft of their total humanity. Workers are treated as disposable objects. Some inhale industrial gas, chemical dust, and other kinds of poison, and when, as a result, they become ill, grow mad or die, they are not just thought of again by the system!

We should note that even Gicaamba does not totally condemn industrial capitalism; if it was controlled by nationals so that the profits from it are re-invested in Kenya, it would not be completely bad. Unfortunately, the great wealth it produces goes to enrich the imperialists. 'The power of our hands goes to feed three people: Imperialists from Europe, Imperialists from America, Imperialists from Japan and of course their local watchmen' (37).

The profit motive is such an overriding capitalist consideration that Kioi can misuse religion or Christianity for his personal material gain. His main concern to get Kiguunda into the church is to have him subdued by the softening effect of religion; it is to render him submissive so that he will be satisfied with his lot in life, and not dare to ask for wage increases; it is to make him, as a consequence, have a softening effect on the other workers who have a high regard for him. Here, indeed, is a critique of organized religion.

The authors attack the proliferation of religious sects in Kenya. Religion is considered a narcotic drug that deadens people's minds, a weapon used by the imperialists to dislodge Kenyans from their land as they covered their eyes to pray. That the Kioi and the Ndugires are hypocritical Christians is clear from the way they persuade the Kiguundas to become Christians while they deny them basic Christian treatment. These big businessmen profess empty Christianity while their behaviour towards potential converts reveals the ways of heartless pagans. They talk about the bitterness of earthly things, but spend their time dreaming about them, erecting business structures here and there. Ndugire says God has been merciful to him, to have given him 'a tiny garden of about a hundred acres'! A tiny garden, indeed.

This brings us to the theme of the thirst for land. In most of Ngugi's works land is a recurrent motif. In this play the recollected past scenes, involving the struggle against British imperialism, is essentially one for the right of ownership of the land of Kenya. Who owns the land, the Kenyans or the foreign British colonialists? That land is wealth is a self-evident truth that needs no contradiction.

Big multinational companies and industries are flourishing in Kenya today, thanks to vast, acquired land; former sellouts and traitors of the Kenyan struggle are wealthy today because they were rewarded by the departing colonial administration with rich, free land; Kioi is a wealthy man today because he owns vast lands on which many poor workers are employed; Ndugire is a former home guard rewarded with 'a tiny' garden of 100 acres, making him a rich employer.

The central plot of the play concerns the tricky way by which Kiguunda is displaced from his own piece of land

by a thirsty, greedy capitalist. His 1½ acres symbolize not only wealth but his power, his manhood, indeed, his whole life. That is why when he loses it, he begins his slow process towards death through drunkenness, through large intakes of *Chibuku*. For, a perpetual drunk, a mad man, is just as good as dead. Luckily for Kiguunda, Gicaamba arrives in time to rescue him.

Mau Mau and the anti-imperialist struggle is a theme that features in several of Ngugi's other works, especially in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Mau Mau is a peasant armed guerrilla organization that stood against British imperialism in Kenya. In *I Will Marry When I Want* it does not feature in the main plot, yet it is echoed throughout the play, thanks to the flashback scenes and the reformulation of its oath, towards the end of the play. Mau Mau serves as a reinforcing motif of the spirit of unity, organization and struggle against British imperialism in the past and neo-imperialism of American, European and Japanese capitalism of today's neo-colonial Kenya.

The re-enactment of Mau Mau struggle and victories also serves to remind the poor people of the betrayal of the Mau Mau cause by some of those who today sit on top of mountains of wealth, and to reiterate the need for all genuine patriots to rededicate themselves to the fighting spirit and virtues of the organization. There is still neo-colonialism to be combated. If Kenya is today politically independent, economically it is still a slave to neo-colonial powers, to international industrial capitalism, to multinational companies from America, Japan and Europe.

Another major theme is the education of the deprived, or the conscientisation of the exploited. It is developed through the experiences of Gicaamba. The Gicaambas as workers are more sophisticated and

conscientised than the naïve and ignorant Kiguundas. The authors of the play use the Gicaambas as eye-openers to the Kiguundas and others.

From Act I we witness them as they educate and sensitize the Kiguundas about the unhealthy relationship between the rich and the poor. They caution the Kiguundas against following the crafty rich foolishly, and against aspiring to marriage connections between them and the rich. They warn them that there can be no genuine healthy relationship between the rich capitalists and poor workers, and that any such relationship will invariably be skewed in favour of the rich. Gicaamba is vindicated. Kiguunda has rushed in where angels fear to tread, and made himself the only fool; he has rushed into a church wedding arrangement proposed by the Kiois, only to find himself losing his prized piece of land.

Throughout the play we notice Kiguunda gradually learning under Gicaamba's influence until at the end his education is complete when he and the others, again under Gicaamba's guidance, come together, ready to be better organized for a greater fight against the capitalist enemies. There is an impending revolution and the people are getting themselves ready for a revolution that will transform the present unjust society and usher in its place one that is more just, where citizens will be equal, socially speaking.

From the point of view of dramatic technique, *I Will Marry When I Want*, is an advance on Ngugi's previous plays, especially those written alone. Its uniqueness partly lies in its being the first of Ngugi's major works to have been written in his native Gikuyu language (before being translated into English by him later), with the intention of reaching the common man, the peasant masses in Kenya. Language is culture, and in this play the authors explore

the full resources of their language, their culture. They draw on several elements from the Gikuyu oral tradition to add to those of traditional drama to produce a play authentically African, at once fresh, contemporary and exciting.

The main action of the play is simple enough: the dispossession of Kiguunda of his 1½ acres of dry land by the wealthy Kioi for the purpose of building an insecticide factory in collaboration with a foreign company. A rich, full-fledged play is then constructed around this bare bone, set in present day neo-colonial Kenya. Thanks to the creative use of flashback, the authors work into this structure the historical Mau Mau struggle with contemporary relevance.

A sub-plot built into the main one involves the humanistic Gicaambas who serve as a foil to the capitalistic Kiois in their contention for the possession of the soul of the Kiguundas, a struggle won by the Gicaambas. The authors make Gicaamba a mature, experienced and conscientised factory worker in order to combine in him both the historical past and the dialectical present.

The air of authentic African theatre comes across to the audience through the elaborate use of recollections of past events that include dance, song, and demonstration. In addition to dancing and singing, there is the use of mime, ritual and other ceremonial forms both traditional and Western - the traditional African marriage ceremony as well as Western Church wedding, for example.

The play is written in verse form, and the verse reflects African rhythmic speech patterns. 'The main function of the verse structure is to emphasize the speech rhythms and patterns and thus make the text more intimate and easier to read'. One can imagine the type of musical, theatrical, experience that would be when the numerous

songs in the appendix are incorporated and sung. The play is thus very lyrical, the language of the actors, full of proverbs, metaphors and other images drawn from the Gikuyu oral tradition.

Also worthy of note is the exploitation by the authors, thanks to their socialist vision, of the conflict inherent in the class base of their two groups of characters: the poor versus the rich, the working class masses versus the small but powerful capitalist elite, owners of the means of production, the have-nots versus the haves. The play opens with one drunk and ends with another, to highlight the madness engendered by capitalism.

There is the striking dramatic reversal, when a climax is immediately followed by an anti-climax: the Kiguundas' joy and wedding phantasies are marred by the sad arrival in tears of their daughter, Gathoni jilted by John Muhuuni.

Above all the authors have skillfully structured the play to act out the basic class conflict for the edification and education of the oppressed. The realistic acting out of the daily wrongs by the rich against the poor, summed up in the clarion call at the end of the play for unity and organization by the exploited against the exploiters, can elicit ready responses from a restive audience. We are talking of a rousing, lyrical ending with the potential to spark off a revolution that will replace social injustice with social justice.

In characterization the authors combine typicality and individuality, with characters of the capitalist class more of types, and those of the working class being both individuals and types. The characters of the bourgeois class are thus more simplified and less complex, types representative of certain capitalistic attitudes. These characters are Kioi and Jezebel, Ndugire and Helen, Ikuua wa Nditika, and John Muhuuni. They are best discussed as

a group because they all share the following attributes: they are exploitative, hypocritical, arrogant, scornful, disdainful, wicked, merciless and ruthless towards the working class. Caricatures, they are satirised and, consequently, bear the greater weight of the authors' anger.

On the other hand there is greater attempt on the part of the playwrights to individualize the working class characters, to make them more complex than the rich ones. Kiguunda, for example, is both a caring father and husband. Though poor, he is proud of his 1½ acres of land and of his position as family head. A true patriot, Kiguunda did not betray Mau Mau as some did to become rich. True, he is more naïve and ignorant than Gicaamba, but sensible enough to discern Gicaamba's good intentions when the latter comes to educate and advise him about mixing with the rich. He is thus receptive to good advice.

Earlier, having discovered the true intention of Kioi, he understandably vents his anger on him, and comes close to stabbing him. His 1½ acres are his whole life and when deprived of them, he becomes frustrated and takes to drinking. There is psychological reality underlying his quarrel and fight with his wife. However, he listens to the wise words of Gicaamba, and joins the others to organize themselves and unite against the exploiters.

Wangeci is a dutiful housewife and a concerned mother. Like any typical worldly mother, she does not care about the ideological issues at stake when two families of unequal status are linked together in marriage, provided her daughter marries well. This consideration alone blinds her, and like her husband, she does not read between the lines in her dealings with the Kiois. Like her husband, she too is naïve and ignorant. The humiliation they suffer at Kioi's home does not ring a bell to them. It should have

sent important signals about the inherent wickedness and hypocritical nature of these 'Christians' trying to woo them to church. One has the impression that, given the chance Kiguunda had of the possibility of betraying the Mau Mau, and thus becoming rich, Wangeci would probably have done so.

As for Gathoni her coquettish behaviour is neither better nor worse than that of many other girls of her age. Nubile and empty-headed, she has nothing but youth and beauty to recommend her. She is easily swept off her feet by John Muhuuni a dashing young bachelor in possession of a large fortune and a smart car. However, she is broken-hearted when, after dallying with her and getting her into trouble, the heartless young man cruelly dumps her. This behavior by John Muhuuni, indicates his commodified view of life. Gathoni to him is just a disposable commodity.

By and large, from the point of view of socialist vision, Gicaamba is the ideal character, with a high sense of social justice. He is the central mouthpiece of the authors, incarnating their positive humanistic values. He is very knowledgeable about the cruel capitalist system, and versed in its dynamics. Having had a long experience of fighting for workers' rights since the colonial times, Gicaamba is a highly conscientized worker.

He strongly believes in solid African values and does not blindly reject modern industrial capitalism for the sake of it. He is likely to tolerate, to some extent, capitalism with a human face, but not the red-in-tooth-and-claw type now practised in Kenya. He could possibly endure capitalism that re-invests its profits, like Jesse Jackson's theory of the Honey Bee and the Pollen Dust, in the soil from where its wealth comes, for the benefit of the citizens of the soil. Gicaamba says:

To have factories and even big
industries

Is good, very good

It's a means of developing the country

The question is this: who owns the
industries

Who benefits from the industries? (39)

An avowed socialist would say these factories and industries would be operated for the greatest good of the greatest majority only under a socialist system. But the capitalism practised in Kenya today is the kind that destroys families, dehumanizes people, and kills them.

This is the point where Gicaamba, the great educator of the depressed, deprived and oppressed comes in. He educates the people, opens their eyes to the realities around them. He calls on parents to rethink the education of their daughters, some of whom today are suffering because they were not given the chance, like the boys, to go to school.

He tells the people who their adversaries are, their intention and methods: he informs them that the best approach against their enemies is organisation and unity of the oppressed; he advises them not to direct their anger against one another, urges them to use their wrath as a missile fired at the exploiters, and concludes that their poverty cannot be solved through a multiplication of beer halls all over the country, nor through a proliferation of churches in the villages:

Ending up with two alcoholics:

The alcoholic of hard liquor;

The alcoholic of the rosary.

Let's rather unite in patriotic love. (114)

And behold the people heed his call, and the play ends on an optimistic note. Gicaamba's wife, Njoki, shares most of his attributes, and may thus be considered part and parcel of him.

Whatever ideology *I Will Marry When I Want* embodies is subtly inscribed in the words and techniques, in the content of the text. Eagleton puts it that, 'The languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality' (Eagleton 1976:27).

The device or techniques deployed by the Ngugis to point out the exploitative, reactionary and conservative attitudes of the capitalist class, on the one hand, and the rebellious, combative spirit of the working class epitomized by Gicaamba, on the other, are ideologically resonant. All these devices foreground the various characters and issues of the text; and as these characters come across to us through their roles, language, speeches and actions, we can discern their tone of voice and, therefore, 'perceive' or 'see' their moral as well as ideological orientation. The way the broad dramatic conflict between the rich and the poor is crafted, so that the play ends on an optimistic note from the point of view of the exploited class, is equally ideologically significant.

At the risk of oversimplification, realism, ideology, commitment, typicality and individuality are central to Marxist criticism, ideas crucial to the evaluation of a work of art. Realism, the genuine dialectical art form, is highly regarded in Marxist criticism. That is why Naturalism and Formalism are strongly attacked and scorned by Marxist critics. It is a basic tenet in Marxist criticism that literature, or art is the social and historical product of the society

producing it. In other words, works of art are socially and historically conditioned. They are not just mysteriously inspired, or based solely on the psychology of their creators. A closely related principle is that no major literary work is conceived within an ideological vacuum; all art emanates from an ideological conception of the world. Therefore, to fully understand a work of art it is important to examine the total social process of which it is a part. Commitment of art is a fundamental principle in Marxist criticism. Art for art's sake is nonsense to Marxist critics; meaningful to them is art for life's sake. For Marxist critics true characterization should combine typicality and individuality.

That said, a bird's eye-view of what goes on in *I Will Marry When I Want* reveals that it is the artists' impressions of Kenya or areas of Kenya under the relentless grip of capitalist neo-colonial forces. The economy is now controlled by black compradors for both their own interest and that of their foreign capitalist allies. This is equally the central concern of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, discussed in the next chapter of this work.

The capitalist class, that has dehumanized the Gicaambas and ruined the Kiguundas, is represented by the Kiois, the Ndugires and Ikuua wa Nditika. These bourgeois would like things to remain as they are; they would like to maintain the status quo so that they can continue to accumulate more and more profits on the backs of the Kiguundas and the others.

For this reason they use religion to mollify workers who would otherwise have been restive and subversive. Christianised workers would be content with their lot as having been ordained by the Lord. Thus, with the workers' potential rebellious spirit contained, their capitalist employers can comfortably hold unto their economic gains.

This is the spirit transmitted by Helen's prayer before the meal in Kiguunda's house.

Pitted against the capitalist class are the workers, represented by the Kiguundas and the Gicaambas and the rest of the other unnamed actors. They are led by the 'agitator' Gicaamba, the most highly ideologized, and conscientised of them all. An old industrial worker since the colonial times, he knows the capitalist system from within and without. An intelligent, moral and honest person with a high sense of social justice, he is best placed to educate the suffering masses and prepare them to fight for a new social order.

Thanks to Gicaamba's tireless effort in educating and sensitizing the masses, Kiguunda is liberated from his parochialism. He now knows that the answer to his poverty and frustration lies neither in the alcohol of the rosary, nor in that of the liquor. He has completed his education under Gicaamba; he and the others are now ready to face the exploiters in an imminent revolution. The exploited are aware that they are working for a new social order, where social justice would reign. We have now seen the two distinct ideological differences between the social classes of the capitalists and the workers.

Since *I Will Marry When I Want* is a product of the social and historical condition of its Kenyan society, it is a socialist-oriented play, in a realist mode; and socialist art is realist art. The play contains the latent forces, the typical trends and forces that, Georg Lukács believes, when fully developed through sensuously realized characters and actions, expose a 'society's inner structure and dynamic'.

In this play such characters include members of the capitalist class, with their acute sense of capitalist methods and profit accumulation, on the one hand, and the

conscientised workers led by Gicaamba, on the other. So when the bourgeois with their typical, inhuman, dehumanizing capitalist attitudes towards the workers are brought into confrontation with a determined proletariat, bent on fighting to improve their material well-being, through a typical crisis situation like grossly debasing exploitation of one social class by another, they are bound to generate other forces to reveal society's inner structure and dynamic.

These characters and actions are also bound to produce historically significant social outcomes, like the impending social revolution hinted at, at the end of the play, imbued with the power of 'world historical'. That is, the forces are capable of making or influencing history. To the extent that they make things different, changing them for the better, they are progressive forces. By the end of the play the proletariat are quite aware that they are in the process of making history; they are working towards a change of the status quo. They are looking forward to a better future in a transformed society of social justice, a crucial principle in socialist art.

In all of African literature, in terms of committing his art to the cause of the proletariat, in terms of harnessing his imaginative efforts for the general good of the community, coupled with pronouncements to this effect, Ngugi wa Thiong'o towers above all other African creative writers. And no less revealing of their commitment to the cause of their suffering people is the fact that the two Ngugis first wrote this play in their native Gikuyu before translating it into English. Their intention was to make the book available to more local consumers than it would have been possible if only the English version had come out. The Marxist Ngugis know only too well that no serious revolution

can take place without the education of the masses, and the transformation of consciousness. Needless to say, it now becomes crystal clear that the two Ngugis' main objective is to lead a relentless crusade against capitalist exploiters. They are bent on artistically inciting the exploited masses to join hands, rise up and overthrow the reactionary and exploitative agents in the Kenyan neo-colonial society.

End Note

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirri. *I Will Marry When I Want*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd, 1982. Page references to the text are taken from this edition.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's DEVIL ON THE CROSS*

Devil on the Cross is about Jacinta Wariinga, a brilliant secondary school student who, under the influence of her indulgent uncle, becomes the teenage mistress of the Rich Old Man of Ngorika. The latter rejects her when she becomes pregnant. Thanks to the sympathy of her parents, she carries out commercial studies. But she finds it hard to get a job in the city because she does not want to yield her body to do so. She is, however, employed by Boss Kihara. But when she refuses to make love to him, he dismisses her from her job and at the same time she is evicted from her house by her cruel landlord. She attempts suicide.

Frustrated, she boards a taxi, Matatu, for her home in Ilmorog. Meanwhile she has received an invitation to attend a feast – the devil's feast. Wariinga, Muturi, Wangari, Gatuiria, Mwireri, as well as the bus driver, Mwaura, are all headed for the feast. The feast which takes place in a cave in Ilmorog turns out to be an arrogant display of the cruel and inhuman methods adopted by foreign and local neo-colonial exploiters to grow richer and richer at the expense of the sweat of the impoverished working class masses in Kenya.

The exploiters vie with one another for the trophy for the cruellest and most efficient exploiter. Wangari brings in

the police to show them the gang of these international and local thieves and robbers only to discover that the police are in collaboration with the criminals to ruin the poor people.

Led by Muturi the working class masses team up and chase the exploiters from the cave. Gatuiria and Wariinga are later engaged, and the marriage ceremony is well underway. However, at the last minute Wariinga discovers to her utter shock that her father-in-law is none other than the Rich Old Man who had disvirgined and then abandoned her in her pregnancy. In a melodramatic manner she pulls a revolver from her bag and shoots him point blank and then walks away from the marriage scene.

The Robbers' Testimonies

The central theme stated almost bluntly by the author is neo-colonial exploitation in Kenya, and the war between the classes in Kenya i.e. the local capitalists in alliance with their foreign cohorts versus the working class. A situation like this necessarily breeds bribery and corruption, indeed immorality of all sorts.

Without a systematic robbery of peasants and workers, a robbery protected and sanctified by law, law courts, parliament, religion, armed forces, police, prisons, education there is no capitalism. It is worse, the robbery, when a country is under the high capitalism of foreigners which is imperialism... (qtd in Cook *et al* 121)

Using the satirical weapon of humour and irony the militant Ngugi more or less calls a spade a spade – in the way he makes the thieves and robbers gathered in the cave at Ilmorog reveal their diabolical future projects to grow richer

and richer at the expense of the peasants, in the interest of accumulation of profit. Indulgent citation of passages from Ngugi was excused in the preface, and that indulgence is nowhere more called for than here in the boasts of the thieves.

In the presence of Muturi, Wariinga, Gaturia etc., these thieves and robbers sound blunt, arrogant and provocative. The language Ngugi endows the thieves and robbers with, together with their trickery to live off the backs of the masses are intended to serve not only as an eye-opener, revealing the socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions of the Kenyan society, but to drive the masses mad, to push them into a revolution of sorts, to incite them to rise against the exploiters in the hope of establishing a new social order. Excerpts from the robbers' testimonies will do. First comes the pot-bellied Gitutu wa Gataanguru, a land speculator who expropriates and sells land to the people, making enormous profits:

"The land wasn't mine, and the money with which I'd paid for it wasn't mine, and I hadn't added anything to the land – where did I get the 200,000 shillings? From the pocket of the people. Yes, because the land really belonged to the people and the money with which I bought it came from the people! I myself had only switched things from one hand to the other. I had done a bit of multiplication and put the answer into my pocket. (106)

"There are two ideas that I'd like to develop now. The first concerns ways and means of increasing hunger and thirst for land in the whole country; this will create famine, and the people will then raise top-grade tycoons. The masses

will do that in this way: as soon as hunger and thirst for land have increased far beyond their present level we who have the land will be selling soil in pots and tins, so that a man will at least be able to plant a seed in them and hang them from the roof of his shelter!

"My friends, when we reach the stage of selling soil to peasants in tins and pots, we'll really be making money! Imagine the whole population holding trays or plates or baskets, queuing for soil at your place! Later they will hang their grains of soil from their roofs or verandas and plant in them potatoes to bribe their crying children to be quiet!

"The other idea I'd like to follow up is how we, the top-grade tycoons can trap the air in the sky and put in tins and sell it to peasants and workers, just as water and charcoal are now sold to them. Imagine the profit we would reap if we were to sell the masses air to breathe in tins or, better if we could meter it! We could even import some air from abroad, imported air, which we could then sell to the people at special prices! Or we could send our own air abroad to be packaged in tins and bottles — yes, because the technology of foreigners is very advanced! And then it would be sent back to us here labelled Made in USA; Made in Western Europe; Made in Japan; This Air is Made Abroad: and other similar ads!" (107)

The next thief is Kihaahu wa Gatheeca. After opening an African Nursery School for VIP children, cheap and managed by Kenyans, a school in which Kenyan songs and lullabies are to be taught, Kihaahu realises he has made a mistake. No Kenyan worth his salt is willing to send his child to an African school. Faced with a disturbing financial problem at hand, Kihaahu ingeniously turns things around thus:

"I hurried back to the nursery school before the bank started harassing me. I changed its name. I baptised it: Modern-Day-Nursery school. Then I looked for a white woman to be the principal. Luckily, I found one. She was a decrepit old woman, half-blind and hard of hearing, and she was always falling asleep. She agreed to join the staff of my school and do her dozing there. "Next I visited certain Nairobi shops. I bought child Mannequins – those plastic human shapes – and I dressed them in expensive clothes. I fixed red wigs to their heads. I put electric machines into their plastic bellies, and then I fixed tiny wheels on the soles of their plastic feet. When I switched on the power, the Mannequins would move about the floor like real human children at play. Through the big glass windows of the school building one could see them playing even if one were standing by the roadside. Then I placed another big advertisement in a newspaper:

Modern-Day Nursery School Experienced European Principal Formerly for Europeans Only. Now Open to a Few Kenyans. Foreign Standards as Before. National Languages, National Songs,

National Names Banned. Foreign Languages, Foreign Songs, Foreign Toys, etc. etc. English Medium of Instruction, Limited Places. Telephone or Call in Your Car, Colour is no Bar: Money is Bar. Fees High.

"Oh, then parents started ringing day and night to reserve places for their children. Whenever the phone rang I would run to wake the European Principal to answer it. But the majority of parents preferred to call in their cars to make sure of a place for their children. And on finding a white woman, and on seeing the Mannequins at play through the windows, the parents would pay the fees then and there: they didn't even bother to find out more about the school.

"I took – or, rather, I instructed the principal to take not more than a hundred children. Each child paid 2,500 shillings a month. I was overjoyed, for that meant every month I was pocketing 250,000 shillings. After paying the rent and the salaries of the dozing principal and her assistants I would be left with over 200,000 shillings every month. And please note, all this time I hadn't shed a single drop of sweat, I hadn't swallowed any dust from chalk and dusters. To me the fruit from that particular tree did not taste bitter – not at all. (112 – 113)

"I started receiving invitations to become a director of branches of foreign companies ...

"That's why I'm very grateful to the masses of the Kenyan people. For their blindness, their ignorance, their inability to demand their rights

are what enable us, the clan of Man-eaters to feed on their sweat without their asking us too many awkward questions ...

"But we shouldn't be complacent or imagine that the masses will always be as foolish. It's the possibility that things may change that has prompted some foreigners to appoint me a director of their companies – to protect them from the wrath of the masses of workers and peasants. I don't mind the assignment. It's fairly lucrative."

Now comes the turn of Mwireri wa Mukirai, B.Sc; B. Comm., M.A., MRSOC IBM. With a strong business educational background he is well-grounded in capitalist theories and methods of profit accumulation. Unfortunately, multinationals have forced him out of every business venture he has undertaken, through the vicious technique of cutthroat competition. A committed nationalist capitalist, this is how Mwireri wa Mukirai intends to fight back foreign capitalist:

"I, Mwireri wa Mukirai, believe only in the first kind of theft and robbery: that is, the theft and robbery of nationals of a given country who steal from their own people and assume the plunder right there, in the country itself. But to the second kind – the theft of foreign thieves and robbers who come to our country and build lairs here, helped by some of us – I say no, *hapana*, a thousand times, no!

"We, the national experts in theft and robbery, should not join hands with foreigners to help them to seize our national wealth and carry it back to their own countries, leaving us only a

few crumbs, the price of the heritage they have taken from us."

"Let's not be their spies, their watchdogs, their disciples, their soldiers, the overseers of their lairs and stores in our own land. Let them leave us alone to exploit our own national fields."

"Why do I say that?"

"I'll speak very frankly, come what may. These people are hypocrites, though you might not know that as you watch them now, peacefully smoking their cigarettes and pipes.

"I, Mwireri wa Mukiraai, have studied thoroughly the system based on the theft of workers and peasants – what in English we call capitalism. The system is this: the masses cultivate; a selected few (those with talents) harvest. Five rich men grow roots in the flesh of fifty workers and peasants. I've got the learning, I don't need anybody to teach me more about it. I believe that we who are here today are capable of building our own lairs and stores in which to stack the products of the sweat of our masses. I am very sure that we, the Kenyan thieves and robbers, can stand on our own feet and end forever this habit of sharing our loot with foreigners. Let me repeat myself for a word hidden in the heart can never win a lawsuit; we should not rob our workers and peasants – I should really call them slaves – and then hand over the spoils to foreigners to do the sharing out, returning a little to us and exporting the rest to their own countries! Why don't they allow

us to steal from America, their Europe and their Japan so that we can import loot into our own country? Why don't they allow us to build lairs and stores in their countries so that ours becomes the decisive voice in the distribution of the products of the sweat of their people?

"Let us steal from among ourselves, so that the wealth of the country remains in the flesh of ten million poor. We can plant the roots of national millionaires. We shall then be able to blind the masses with the following words:

"Wananchi, don't complain! When the foreigners were eating did you ever moan? Did you ever scratch yourselves? Our people, the plague that is stalking the country is not as alien as the one in Europe. You should be rejoicing at the fact that your sweat and blood has produced the native millionaires.

"After finishing school, I started working for various imperialist companies... One day I stopped to ask myself: Are these foreigners employing me as an individual, or are they employing the colour of my skin? Are they buying my abilities or my blackness? And all at once I realised that I was being used as window-dressing. If our people looked for foreigners, they would see me at the window of the enterprise; and on seeing me, they would think they had a share in the enterprise, and so they would continue to acquiesce in the foreigners' theft in the belief that they were becoming wealthy bit by bit ...

"So I asked myself: Mwireri wa Mukiraai, how can you allow the imperialists to milk their country and yours? Don't we have people of our own who can milk the masses, as they are being milked? Are foreigners the only ones with skill at milking? Are they the only people who know how to eat what has been produced by others? Can't you, Mwireri wa Mukiraai step forward to exploit your own people's sweat, use it to produce things and then sell the things back to the owners of the sweat, so that they produce them first and then have to buy them, grow crops and then buy the same crops? We don't want eaters of what has been produced by our people to come from foreign countries: we can encourage the growth of a class of eaters of other people's products – yes, a class of man-eaters – in our own land.

"With all my heart, I shouted at the foreigners: Now we shall see who is who, you fucking bastards! I'll show you that even here we have men who have been initiated into the modern art of stealing and robbing the workers! You foreigners will have to go back home and rape your own mothers, and leave me to toy with my mother's thighs!" (167-68)

Mwireri wa Mukiraai, according to his own testimony, undertakes several business ventures. But he is forced out of them by stiff competition from foreign companies. The latter produce and sell cheaply whatever product Mwireri wants to produce locally. The result is that Mwireri is forced to sell out to foreign companies and is left with no other choice but to find service with them, once more, this time

as a wholesaler and importer of fabrics. This subservience to foreign competitors notwithstanding, Mwireri remains essentially undaunted: "But I have never abandoned my ambition to drive them out of the arena." Well, this piece of persistent effrontery will cost him his life; for before the novel ends, Mwireri will be eliminated by the efforts of the collaboration between Kenyan and foreign thieves and robbers; specifically he will be killed by Mwaura in a contrived accident in Matatu Matata Matamu.

The Testimony of Nditika wa Nguunji, the fabulously rich speculator who even speculates on immortality:

"... My success at stealing and robbing has been restricted to the field of smuggling and black market. Let me explain briefly. I have many sources of expensive stores – pearl, gold, tanzanite – rare animal skins like those of leopards and lions, elephant tusks and rhino teeth, snake poison and many other things, all from the public mines and the game reserves. I export them.

The other commodities that I smuggled overseas and neighbouring countries are salt, sugar, maize, wheat, rice, coffee and tea. Personally speaking Amin's departure was a loss. During his rule Ugandan coffee brought me in more than 50 million shillings ...

"Sometimes, when I know Budget Day is near, I try as hard as I can to buy information about the goods that will go up in price from those close to the secret, be they clerks or whoever, I then buy and hoard large quantities of these goods. Sometimes I buy them in a store and

sell them in the same store the following day – for a profit.

"Whenever I, Nditika wa Nguunji, contemplate my extra-ordinary wealth I ask myself sadly several searching questions. With all my property what do I have, as a human being, that a worker or a peasant, or a poor man does not have? I have one mouth, just like the poor; I have one belly, just like the poor; I have one heart, just like the very poor; and I have one ...

"So, seeing that I have only one mouth, one belly, one heart, one life and one cock, what's the point of robbing others?

"It was revealed to me that night that in this country we should have a factory for manufacturing human parts like mouth, bellies, hearts and so on, spare parts for the human body. This would mean that a rich man who could afford them could have two or three mouths, two bellies, two cocks and two hearts. If the first mouth became tired of chewing, and his belly could hold no more, then the spare mouth and belly could take over. When an old man like me had a sugar girl, instead of falling asleep soon after the first engine had started, he could simply start up the other engine and continue with the job in hand, the two engines supporting each other all night long, so that on waking up in the morning he would feel that his heart and body were completely relaxed ... We could purchase immortality with our money and leave death as the prerogative of the poor." (177–180)

The capitalist thieves outline their methods of enrichment with obvious glee and gross insensitivity. Some of their future projects, the conception of which are reminiscent of Swift's projections in Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*, are really fantastic. Gitutu's "bright" idea is a plan wherein the common people will line up to purchase pots and trays of soil to plant crops in instead of owning stretches of farming plots. The same plan envisages the bottling and selling of air to the masses. For Kihaahu, the masses will no longer be bothered about housing in the future. Tents or bird's nests will be available to consumers who will buy them, carry them about and pitch them wherever they like to harbour their heads while the rest of their bodies will be at the mercy of the elements of nature. For Nditika, the rich will be able to purchase more organs for fuller sensual pleasure and longevity and death will be the accursed preserve of the poor, while immortality will be the prerogative of the rich.

However, these projects, sadistic as they are, are nothing compared to the sadism of Kimeenderi's, revealed to Wariinga by the voice. Kimeenderi's plan beats those of other thieves. According to it workers will be herded into barbed-wire compounds where their blood and sweat will be drained through pipes, packaged and then sold or exported at greater profits.

The above plans, unlike the actual realistic capitalist methods through which the exploiters have accumulated their wealth, are grotesque exaggerations within the satirical medium of burlesque. True, they are not realistically realizable, but are a reflection of the consumerism, mental attitude, and secret fantasies of the bourgeois in the neo-colonial Kenyan society. They are the extent to which these greedy men would go, if it were

possible, to reduce the rest of humanity to nought, while preserving for themselves all the good things of life. They are the extension of man's basic greed and selfishness, evidence of his evil nature.

This Kenyan society of the novel reveals two conflicting ideologies: the bourgeois (capitalist) ideology versus the socialist ideology, a socialist novel par excellence. For it not only pits the capitalist class against the proletariat but depicts them in language characteristic of Marxist analysis of the methods of capitalism and attitudes of capitalists.

The proletariat are represented to a large extent by Muturi, Wangari, and to a less extent by Wariinga and Gaturia, and by the leader of Ilmorog workers' union. The workers are exploited by the capitalist thieves who control the network of businesses and key economic structures and activities. Wangari, for example, is tricked out of a bank loan; Wariinga is not only victimised by her predatory landlord, but is also sexually exploited and abandoned by the Rich Old Man. She is commodified. Besides, her mechanic job site is bought over by some capitalist rogues, leaving the community of mechanics stranded.

As it is the practice in most postcolonial societies, the local government works in close collaboration with foreign capitalists, neo-colonialism succeeding largely because of local support. Even the police, guardians of peace and law, are in favour of the thieves. This is an ironical twist that leaves the poor bare and completely vulnerable.

The great disparity between the capitalists and the proletariat comes out in the quality of their living quarters: the ones live in posh and luxurious buildings, the others in slums and cardboard shelters:

Our Ilmorog, it appears, does not change much.
Two whole years after the Devil's feast, Ilmorog

manifested the same divisions as before. The Golden Heights had gone on expanding. Mansions with walls decorated with candles in gold candelabra and Persian carpets. The floors were still being built with the wealth that local tycoons had in excess. The same was true of beds made out of silver and gold: this had become so common and normal that nobody would have thought that the other residents of the area would even be surprised at it. Foreign companies, especially those from USA, Canada, West Germany, France, Britain, Italy and Japan, had increased. The car was a good measure of the increased dominance of foreign property over our lives. (The truth of the matter is that today there is not a single make of car – Toyota, Datsun, Mazda, Honda, Subaru, Ford, Cadillac, Vauxhall, Volvo, Fiat, Jaguar, Alfa Romeo, Mercedes Benz, BMW and many others – you will not find spinning along Ilmorog's roads). Foreign finance houses and stores – that gathered in people's money had virtually overrun Ilmorog. Two American banks, from Chicago and New York, were the latest to build stores, money-trading bases, in this heartland of wealth. Njeruca too had expanded. Cardboard shelters, trenches filled with foul water, detritus from foreign-owned factories, shit and urine had expanded Njeruca slightly. Even the villages that used to be on the outskirts of Njeruca – like Ngaindeithie village, where Wariinga's parents lived – had been swallowed up by Njeruca. Workers, the unemployed, the very poor, sellers

of illegal brews and sellers of oranges and mandazi, traders in their own bodies were all crammed into the vast Njeruca slumyard. Njeruca also had several tiny shops that sold meat, eggs, sukuma wika vegetables, salt, beer, pepper, onions and flours.

The owners of these shops and slum shelters were the Golden Heights residents. Some visited Njeruca to collect their rent and profit, but most of them employed thugs to collect rent for them. Even the Devil's Angels had established a branch in Ilmorog. (233)

The contrasting qualities of social existence of both the rich and the poor had been enshrined in two respective creeds: that of the rich, and that of the poor. For the capitalists (the rich and the imperialists) their creed, with a sarcastic, biblical twist runs thus:

Blessed is he who bites and soothes,
Because he will never be found out
Blessed is the man who burns down another
man's house
And in the morning joins him in grief,
For he shall be called merciful.
Blessed is the man who robs another of five
shillings
And then gives him back half a shilling for salt,
For he shall be called generous
As for the man who bites and doesn't know how
to soothe,
And the one who steals from the masses
And does not attempt to deceive them with
honeyed words,
Woe unto him!... (209 – 210)

The creed of the workers with obvious didacticism and a Marxist or socialist agenda runs as follows:

"I believe that we, the workers are of one clan
And hence we should not allow ourselves
To be divided by religion, colour or tribe.
I believe that in the organisation of the workers
Lies our strength,
For those who are organised never lose their
way,
And those who are not organised
are scattered by the sound of one bullet.
I therefore believe in the unity of the workers,
Because unity is our strength
I believe that imperialism and its local
representatives are
enemies of the progress of the workers
and peasants of the whole nation.
I therefore vow always to struggle, always to
struggle
against neo-colonialism, the
last vicious kick of a dying imperialism." (210)

In a symbolic act, a long procession of workers led by Muturi chases the capitalist thieves from the cave. With clubs, sticks and iron rods the workers chastise the robbers. The victorious peasants and workers then gather outside the cave to listen to speeches from their leaders, a veritable occasion for the pedagogy of the oppressed or the education of the deprived. The speakers are Muturi, Ilmorog's students' leader and Ilmorog's workers' leader, both highlighting the virtues of the workers' unity and the need for a relentless struggle against exploiters, the need to change the present social order and to usher in a new social order. In a passage of admirable poetic prose with

balanced contrasts and parallel construction, Muturi the first speaker begins thus:

"Friends or perhaps I should call you Clansmen, for we who are gathered here now belong to one clan: the clan of workers – I think all of us saw the incredible spectacle of those who have bellies that never bear children come to scorn us. Those bellies are not swollen by disease. They have been fattened by the fruit of our sweat and blood. Those bellies are barren, and their owners are barren. What about us, the workers? We build houses; others occupy them; and we the builders are left out in the rain. We make clothes; others take them, and dress well; and we tailors go naked. We grow food; others eat it; and we, the farmers, sleep with our stomachs growling through the night. Look here. We build good schools; other people's children find places in them, and ours go looking for food in rubbish heaps and dustbins. Today we are taking a stand. Today, here, we refuse to go on being the pot that cooks but never tastes the food."
(208)

Part of the Ilmorog students' leader's speech, marked at every turn with a radical Marxist discourse, runs as follows:

"We, the mass of students in Ilmorog, whether in primary or secondary schools or at the university, support the workers fully in their just struggle against the system of modern theft and robbery. The workers are at the forefront of the fight against neo-colonialism, the last stage of imperialism. When the organisation of Ilmorog workers got wind of the gathering of local and

international thieves, they informed us, as a student organisation. And we, the students, sat down and asked ourselves: what can we do to show our solidarity with the workers? It was then that we printed cards to indicate to the people the nature of the feast, to show them that it was going to be like a Devil's feast organised by Satan, the king of devils. Let us all now join hands with the working people in their just war against the drinking of human flesh, and the many other crimes perpetrated by imperialism in its neo-colonial stage. Let us join hands with the workers as they struggle to build a house that will benefit all builders. What greater thing can our education do for our nation? That's why, we the students, said that we would not be left behind, that we must join hands in this wonderful drama in which we, the people, were to throw out the Devil and all his followers!" (209)

The last speech is that of Ilmorog workers' leader, based essentially on drawing the attention of the crowd to the ideological differences between the capitalists' and the workers' creeds quoted above.

After these classic speeches of conscientisation, Wariinga's and Gaturia's minds are fully made up: they are on the side of the workers, the exploited. It is during this period of speech-making that Muturi secretly hands to Wariinga a gun, an instrument of great symbolic significance. It is with the gun that Wariinga kills the Rich Old Man, pointing the way to the type of action needed by the exploited. Their salvation lies in their eventual rising with arms against the capitalist thieves and overthrowing

them to establish a new social order based on socialist principles. The time may not yet be ripe for that ultimate action, but the future is on the side of the strugglers since the youth (primary, secondary and university youth) are on their side.

Most of Ngugi's works are based on the experiences and struggles of the Kenyan people covering the colonial and neo-colonial periods. Unlike West Africa with its enervating climate and infestation with malaria-carrying mosquitoes, East Africa in general and Kenya in particular was a region with a conducive climate for European settlement. Hence the influx of Europeans to East Africa where, in addition to the healthy climate, they found fertile valleys and hills for extensive agricultural exploitation. The Europeans expropriated most of these lands from the native Africans, driving them on to unproductive patches of lands from where they trooped daily to work for the whites on the rich estates owned by these whites. Here is Ngugi's factual account of the whole thing:

Just opposite the ridges on which our village was scattered were the sprawling green fields owned by the white settlers. They grew coffee and tea and pyrethrum. I worked there sometimes, digging the ground, tending the settlers' crops, and this for less than ten shillings. Every morning African workers would stream across the valley to sell their sweat for such a meager sum of money, and at the end of the week or month they would give it all to the Indian trader who owned most of the shops in our area for a pound of sugar, maize, or grains, thankful that this would silence the children's clamour for a few days. These workers were

the creators of wealth but they never benefited from it: the products of their collective sweat went to feed and clothe the children of the Indian trader, and those of the European settlers not only in our country but even those in England.

One day I heard a song. I remember the scene so vividly: the women who sang it are now before me – their sad faces and their plaintive melody. I was then ten or eleven. They were being forcibly ejected from the land they occupied and sent to another part of the country so barren that people called it the land of black rocks. (Ngugi *Homecoming* 48)

As soon as the Kenyans achieved political independence, the Europeans departed, but their rich estates had been bought by black tycoons like the Gitutus and the rest,

“... the settler owning 600 acres of land is replaced by a single African owning the same 600 acres. There has been no change in the structure and nature of ownership of various companies, banks and industries; two or three European directors – the companies remain foreign-owned.” (*Ibid* xvi)

So the white colonial exploiters are replaced by the black neo-colonial exploiters who, as the Master of Ceremonies says in the parable of the talents, still work in collaboration with their foreign, departed masters to feed fat on the sweat of the peasants in Kenya.

Thematically these issues of land, struggling to own land, exploitation of one group by another, have been one that has pre-occupied Ngugi in most of his works:

Capitalism itself is a system of unabashed theft and robbery. Thus theft, robbery, corruption can never be wrong under capitalism because they are inherent in it. Well, they are the structure. Without a systematic robbery of peasants and workers, robbery protected and sanctified by laws, law courts, parliament, religion, armed forces, police, prisons, education, there is no capitalism. It is worse, the robbery, when a country is under the higher capitalism of foreigners which is imperialism. (qtd in Cook *et al op. cit*)

All these facts point to the fact that what we have in *Devil on the Cross* is an artistic transmutation of the social and historical realities of Kenya. As Ngugi even points out in his prison document from which the above excerpt was quoted, the conception of the novel was inspired by an actual news item retrieved from a scrap of paper found in a dustbin in the prison yard. (*Ibid*)

What this proves once more is that literature is nothing but the product of the social conditions of the society producing it.

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. (Ngugi *op. cit.* xv)

As a fictional document that nevertheless gives us invaluable insight into the theory and practice of neo-colonialism and capitalist exploitation, *Devil on the Cross* is unmatched in contemporary African literature.

Indeed, in all of African literature, in terms of committing his art to the cause of the proletariat, pressing social issues and the general good of the community, coupled with clear pronouncements to that effect, Ngugi wa Thiong'o stands head and shoulders above all other African creative writers. True, his literary output as it spans across the years, evinces unequal degrees of commitment, understandably so.

The Ngugi of the early works like *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between* is barely militant; the Ngugi of a middle or transitional work like *A Grain of Wheat* is clearly militant, and the Ngugi of more recent works like *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* has become most militant. In his polemical writings, in his fiction, in his drama and even in his life style, as testified by some of what we have cited in this chapter, Ngugi comes through to the reader as one steeped in Marxism and Marxist analysis of capitalism; he comes through to the reader as one committed to the cause of the suffering working class anywhere in the world; he is a man with a progressive and radical way of thinking; he is a writer who thinks that the way of salvation lies in a socialist programme that will liberate the people and usher in a society of social justice, of equitable distribution of the fruits of the sweat of the people's efforts. To realize the socialist programme Ngugi feels that the African intellectuals must fight alongside the African masses:

I believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we

must strive for a reform of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country, and sing a new song. Perhaps, in a small way, the African writer can help in articulating the feelings behind this struggle. (*Ibid* 50)

Talking about the genesis of *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi says:

... I would use any and everything I had ever learnt about the craft of fiction – allegory, parable, satire, narrative, description, reminiscence, flashback, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dialogue, drama – provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme and story. But content – not language and technique – would determine the eventual form of the novel. And content? The Kenyan people's struggles against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism! (qtd in Cook *et al* op. cit. 120)

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi comes out very committed, the thematic issues showing that he is really concerned with the Kenyan people's struggle against neo-colonial exploitation. The novel is structured in such a way that at the end, like *I Will Marry When I Want*, the masses come out victorious, or optimistic about the future. Many things fall in place to foster this didactic end: on the one hand there are the hated capitalist thieves who are the main butts of Ngugi's satire. On the other, there are progressive prototypes like Muturi, Wangari, Wariinga, Gatuiria, the Ilmorog students' leader and the Ilmorog workers' leader. Ngugi makes the workers led by Muturi successfully chase the thieves from the cave, and he also

makes Wariinga destroy the Rich Old Man of Ngorika with a gun. These acts are symbolic of the eventual victory of the oppressed over the oppressors.

A study of the speeches made by the workers and students outside the cave reveals how Ngugi puts into the mouths of others what we know only too well that the progressive and radical Ngugi himself would have said in a more polemical mode. The obvious didactic intent thus reveals Ngugi's urgent commitment.

No less revealing of his commitment to the cause of the suffering people is the fact that Ngugi wrote *Devil on the Cross* in his native Gikuyu before translating it himself into English. His intention was to avail the work to more local people than it would have been possible if only the English version had come out. The Marxist Ngugi knows only too well that no serious revolution can take place without the education of the masses. And the language of the masses is the language the common man can understand; Ngugi knows that there can be no revolution without the transformation of consciousness, change of mentality. That is why the speeches made outside the cave are made by the workers for their own mutual education as well as for the education of Gatuiria and Wariinga who henceforth are converted on to the side of the workers against the exploiters.

Ngugi's ultimate objective is a crusade against capitalist exploiters, inciting the exploited masses to join hands, rise up and overthrow the reactionary agents in the Kenyan neo-colonial bourgeois society. One has the impression that the Kenyan people, thanks to the efforts of people like Ngugi, should be highly critical and conscientized, ideologically and socio-politically conscious.

On the other hand, however, it was a mark of the ultra conservatism of the Kenyan administration at that time that, for all Ngugi's efforts at sensitizing the population on the atrocities of neo-colonialism, for his commendable exertions in the pedagogy of the oppressed, particularly in those days of resurgent multiparty politics in Africa, one could still hear reactionary echoes from Kenya, to the effect that Daniel Arap Moi, that country's President in the 1990s was still adamantly opposed to the idea of introducing democratic reforms in Kenya.

We should quote, once more, from that passage in his prison notes in which Ngugi talks of making use of any and everything I had ever learnt about the craft of fiction – allegory, parable, satire, narrative, description reminiscence, flash back, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dialogue, drama – provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme, and story. But content – not language and technique – would determine the eventual form of the novel. And the content? The Kenyan people's struggles against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism. (*Ibid*)

Readers of *Devil on the Cross* would agree that Ngugi has, indeed, made use of some techniques not specifically associated with the novel, and by so doing has, as Cook *et al* have said, dared to challenge established assumptions and principles concerning literary genres. (*Ibid* 243) "Yet this is no more radical an approach than that adopted by many novelists across the world in the second half of this century in attempting to revitalize the novel whose funeral oration has been prematurely read by numerous critics." (*Ibid*)

Despite his intention to use everything he has learnt about the craft of fiction Ngugi makes one important provisor: "provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme and story." In the long run, therefore, for all its unconventional bent, Ngugi's approach is not a rejection of literary criteria but an indication that he "seems at all times to have sought the ultimate goal of any committed writer: to harness the 'laws' of art to the dictates of his own conscience." (*Ibid*) Thus Ngugi is open to all possible techniques. If any comes naturally to serve his end, so be it.

This certainly places *Devil on the Cross* in a class of its own, differentiating it technically from a well-crafted novel like *A Grain of Wheat*. Making good his plan in *Devil on the Cross* means that Ngugi is obliged to make his prose in places conform to this or that set style, stylized. In places it can read like a piece of satire, a parody, a didactic piece, a sermon or a conclusion to a sermon, a parable, a story partly told in imitation of the oral tale or a story into which music has been worked, etc.

According to D. H. Lawrence, "we judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion and nothing else." (qtd in Coombes 8) Now we only need to apply this statement to *Devil on the Cross* to measure the novel's "effect on our sincere and vital emotion." True, we do not have here complex and fully developed characters like some of those in his other novels since those in *Devil on the Cross* are reduced to types for specific purposes; true, the narrative complexity of *A Grain of Wheat* and, to some extent, that of *Petals of Blood*, is lacking in *Devil on the Cross*; true, the purported narrator in *Devil on the Cross* is not consistently doing his job. Above all, Mwireri's narrative in Mwaura's Matatu simply runs into that of the master of

ceremonies in the cave at Ilmorog without a clear distinction.

Yet, for all these and other flaws, the overall impression about this novel is patently positive. For all its stylization the novel is humorous, enormously interesting and entertaining, in places exciting, thanks to the inexhaustible fertility of Ngugi's imagination. Interesting as some of the above cited testimonies are, the interest they transmit is nothing compared to the brilliant humour, excitement and even hair-raising drama generated in the cave as contained in the section of the novel titled "Rebuttal", following Kihaahu's testimony and the reactions and interruptions provoked by the testimony of Mwireri wa Mukiraai. Here one finds scintillating drama as some of the thieves put up vigorous defences of their projects and methods against the vicious attacks of other competitors; here the reader finds interesting attacks and counter attacks, or dramatic rebuttal. There is boisterous applause raised in support of this or that thief, or in favour of the timely interventions of the master of ceremonies who has brought back calm after near chaos and pandemonium. There is a tensely eerie atmosphere in the cave with an ominous silence brought by an impending shoot-out by Kihaahu, Gitutu and Ithe wa Mbooi.

There is the curious complaint launched against Mwireri wa Mukiraai by the leader of the U.S. Delegation of the international thieves to the effect that Mwireri is bent on driving out the foreign thieves from Kenya; that in trying to make the local thieves self-reliant Mwireri is effectively attempting to force the international thieves to quit their hugely lucrative investments in Kenya. He is trying to bite the finger that fed him. No wonder, then, that Mwireri will be eliminated in a "mysterious" road accident, thanks to

the combined ingenuity of both the local and international robbers, facilitated by Mwaura's Matatu Matata Matamu.

In all of these astoundingly ironical revelations, the conscious reader is aware of Ngugi's subtle educative strategies. The satirical and radical Ngugi never just states a situation simply and leaves it at that. No, Ngugi must exploit it to the fullest, often squeezing it dry of its educative value and thus exposing the repressive, pauperizing, capitalist tactics to the representatives of the oppressed masses watching this incredible drama. At the risk of over repetition, here, indeed, is the education of the deprived for critical consciousness.

This quality alone dismisses the possibility of boredom, thus enhancing the readability of the novel. And this is one function of what good literature should be – a purveyor of pleasure and entertainment. What if that literature is didactic? What if while it pleases us, it subtly teaches us some lessons on how the exploited classes in Africa and elsewhere can gain salvation in this material world, which is the other main function of good literature?

In any case, the didacticism does not come out in the form of a moral tag appended onto the novel; it is not clumsily forced into the story but skillfully worked into the fabric of the novel. It emerges out of the internal logic and consistency of the novel. For a book that is highly didactic, Ngugi's ability to capture and maintain our interest is commendable.

How has he been able to accomplish this task? One answer is that Ngugi has at his command an ideological perspective, a Marxist ideological perspective that enables him to see things and situations in a better and critical light. For example, we cannot but admire his ingenuity in using the parable of the talents to illustrate the functioning

of neo-colonialism, a practice sustained by local middlemen, compradors who carry out business and economic activities in Kenya for the benefit of their richer and more powerful foreign masters. The mastery of this perspective also allows Ngugi to make use of Mwireri to lay bare to us capitalist methods of acquiring and accumulating wealth. This insight lends force and conviction to Ngugi's writing and makes it excellently readable prose.

Conclusion

From a Marxist perspective art is conservative as well as revolutionary. Art is conservative in that it depicts reality as it is, a passive reflection of reality. Art is revolutionary in that it not only depicts reality as it is but attempts to influence it, to redefine reality. Revolutionary art goes ahead to raise the individual's consciousness to societal imperfections in such a way as to spur him to dare, as it were, to carry up arms against a sea of troubles. That is, revolutionary art provokes the individual into action. (Barricelli *et al* 109)

And when this can happen in our larger society, it becomes evidence of the writer's commitment. It becomes a clear sign of literature being used to encourage social reactions. Generally, all our authors discussed are committed artists, but they are placed at various points within the continuum of commitment. At one end of the spectrum are Linus Asong and Chinua Achebe, more or less moderates; at the other end are Ousmane Sembene, Bate Besong and Ngugi wa Thiong'o who are more or less radicals, with Ngugi occupying the very extreme point of the spectrum. In between these extremes lie Alobwed'Epie,

Victor Epie Ngome, Francis Nyamnjoh, Tah Asongwed and John N. Nkengasong.

Ngugi is thus the most radical and his art equally the most revolutionary. As we have seen from our study, Ngugi is not one to advocate piecemeal reform, or cosmetic changes here and there in a vicious political system. He would rather prefer a total eradication of an evil capitalist system, replacing it with a socialist one.

Now there is fear that a very committed writer like Ngugi, for example, may sacrifice his art for tendentiousness, that the urge to encourage specific social reactions may override the need to pay greater attention to his artistry. This indeed is a legitimate fear, but one that can be comfortably laid to rest because, as indicated in this study, Ngugi has carried out some bold stylistic experiments that have worked marvellously with regard to his subject matter without vitiating his art. By so doing Ngugi has demonstrated that he cares about his art, and that the fertility of his imagination, like wine that improves with age, only grows from strength to strength as he ages.

As committed writers, all our authors are, in Ngugi's phrase, writers in politics. (*Writers in Politics* preface) In their politics they side with the people in varying degrees, as we have established. They are optimistic in the people's struggles over the forces of evil, and projecting either hope in the future, as hinted at in *Anthills of the Savannah*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Devil on the Cross*, or a clear victory of the people over the oppressors, as in *The Crown of Thorns*, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* and *God's Bits of Wood*. Even if for no other reason, the political consideration should make these and similar works inspiring texts for the struggling peoples of our times which have witnessed resurgent multiparty politics and an upsurge of democratic

political reforms. These works enlighten and hearten, to some extent, struggling people and foster the "pedagogy of the oppressed." (Freire 1983)

End Note

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Devil on the Cross*. London: Heinemann, 1982. All page references to the text are taken from this edition.

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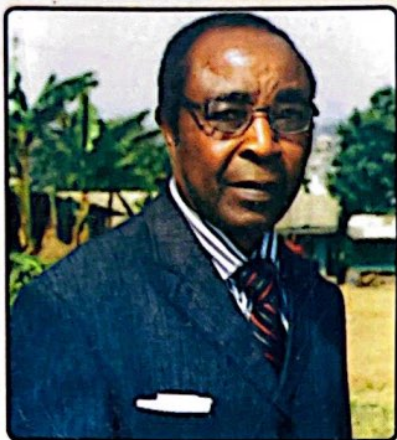
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